

**Yom Kippur Morning 5774**  
**Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim**  
**Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander**

## OUR SIXTH SENSE: A SENSE OF URGENCY

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die, ... who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled, ... who shall live to see ripe old age and who shall not."

I don't believe that.

I know, I'm probably not supposed to get up here and say it, but it's true - and I'm fairly certain many of you don't believe it either. I don't believe in fate. I don't believe we have a predetermined destiny. And if we did, the God I believe in wouldn't keep it to Him/Herself letting us guess and wonder and worry.

Yet I am glad that this important passage is in our prayer books, jarring us fully awake, sharpening our focus. Like the wayward and defiant son of Deuteronomy, whom the Torah says we are to bring before the elders of community at the gate of the town and stone to death, sometimes we need a little hyperbole to make us stop in our tracks and really pay attention. There is absolutely no evidence that any children were ever stoned for their rebelliousness - but one might guess that when this passage was studied, Religious School classroom behavior improved remarkably. Harsh texts, like the powerful verdicts of *Unetaneh Tokef*, startle and scare us back to our senses, in this case hopefully igniting a sixth sense - our sense of urgency.

My colleague and mentor, Rabbi Jeff Marx, was the first to open my eyes to one of the most poignant gifts of the rabbinate. We talked about how, through the hospital visits we make, the grieving families we support, the funerals we facilitate, we come to carry around on our shoulder this small constant reminder of our mortality. I was actually already coming to understand that on my own and feeling weighed down by its presence. But what he taught me and helped me see is that this reminder, of the fragility and vulnerability of life, is a gift, a blessing. It inspires a sense of urgency. It helps us recognize that life isn't just the stuff we look forward to when we get through the bad parts, the happy ending when everything works out; or the times about which we grow nostalgic before adversity ever came. Life is also the beautiful, messy, moving, emotional stuff that happens right smack in the middle of it all, good and bad. We are blessed to have that sense of urgency that the prayer book incites when it cries out: "This is your life!" *Unetaneh Tokef*, who knows what tomorrow will bring - so make the most of what you have - of all you have - right now.

Savor the sweetness. This room this morning is filled with sweet stories - wonderful stories of kindness and patience and love. There are stories of fighting passionately for causes in which one deeply believes. Of touching hearts, holding hands, moving mountains. There are incredible success stories - self-made success, seizing and making the most of opportunities, asserting one's priorities, redefining the very parameters of success. There are silly stories - the kind of story

that, whenever told, how ever often it's told - never fails to elicit big belly laughs as everyone remembers when. And there are love stories - love-at-first-sight stories, love conquers all stories, love despite-it-all through-thick-and-thin stories.

Do you know how I know? Because you share them with me. You share them when we cry and laugh and remember a parent or grandparent or spouse who has just died and you honor me with the stories of their lives. But don't wait. Tell these stories now, and make more stories. Because families tighten and rally around one another when these stories are told. When we have a sense of urgency, we appreciate how sweet life can be.

How sweet ... and, oh how full.

I have become addicted to a blog called "Superman Sam". It's kept by two colleagues of mine - another rabbinic couple - with whom I overlapped while in rabbinical school. I've always thought very highly of both of them. They are creative, eloquent, thoughtful - and overwhelmingly productive. Between the blogs both of them keep, the incredible amount of reading they do, the baking and crafts they share ... oh yes, and the four children they raise while both maintaining pulpit jobs ... well, they certainly put me to shame! But I would read Phyllis' blog especially from time to time - called "Ima on the Bima" - because, well, I'm an Ima on the Bima, too.

And then one day, over a year ago now, she dropped a bombshell. Her second oldest child, Sam, then six years old, had been diagnosed with leukemia. I've tried many times to put myself in her shoes in that moment and others since then, and I've failed every time. I just can't possibly imagine what that moment and the roller coaster of a journey since has felt like. But Phyllis and Michael - and Sam, and their whole family - have done something truly A-M-A-Z-I-N-G. They've shared their journey with so many of us through their blog "Superman Sam" and, even as it has helped them draw strength from a worldwide network of support, it has given those of us who follow it boundless inspiration, too. Because each day of their journey is so *full*.

There are the visits from family and friends; letters and packages, gifts and games that occupy the hours surrounding and during treatments. There's been FaceTime to be in touch with his elementary school teacher and classmates; competitive laps around the hospital floor to keep up his strength and see if he can beat his own goals. In one of my favorite reports, there was "eye-bombing" - sticking googly-eyes on inanimate objects and medical equipment - you know, to make them more personable and cute. Yes, there's nausea and pain, lethargy and worry - a tremendous amount of worry. And I don't for a minute want to minimize any of it. Yet there's also so much life; every day they share is so rich and so full. They count blessings and use rituals; they enjoy gifts received and let us know how we can help.

This family did not need a heightened sense of urgency to help them live life to its fullest. Yet as they *continue* to fill each day with as much meaning and joy as possible - not, as I said before, waiting until (please God) the happy ending when everything all works out - they are an inspiration to us all. As Phyllis wrote on the blog just a couple of days ago:

In one of my favorite moments of the day, amidst a massive Nerf battle between the brothers [Sam and David], in walks Dr M [who just the day before had blown a Shofar]. Today he joined in the battle....(on Sam's team, of course...).

There was a whole kerfluffle when David sent a (Nerf) dart right at the doc and he retaliated with a water syringe...and then the Bears/Packers business got involved because David was using a Bears pillow as his shield....and then it really got out of hand....

[But] tonight's Epic Nerf Battle confirmed for me One Important Thing: We spent a lot of time debating whether or not it was a good idea to keep the whole family together, to uproot our kids from their schools and their friends, and to bring them here to Wisconsin [where Sam is receiving treatment]. We agonized over the decision....and tonight, as I watched the boys play and laugh and scream with delight...as I watched Sam, full of energy and excitement, and David, totally at ease with the whole situation.... I was able to say this (with tears in my eyes both from laughter and well...all of it):

Best. Decision. Ever.

And that's where we are today.

Friends, that's where we all are today - Yom Kippur is Decision Day. Let our liturgy provide us with a sense of urgency that we might make our best decisions, the ones that ensure we are living life to its fullest.

Because so much of life is sweet and each day can be so full. And even when we struggle ... life is so very precious. How well I was reminded of this just this past week.

I was utterly elated after Rosh Hashanah. Exhausted, yes, but with the beauty of our worship Wednesday evening, the spiritual high of Thursday morning, the energy of our family service and the calm of Tashlich Thursday afternoon, I just felt so uplifted and blessed.

Ordinarily, the first phone call my parents and I would make after returning back home from services on Rosh Hashanah would be to my grandparents in St. Louis. But, as it turns out, we had already received a call. My grandfather had been admitted to the hospital that afternoon and was in the ICU. By the next morning, his doctor was encouraging our family to gather. My parents left on the next flight. I waited to be able to give hugs and some encouragement to Eli when he came home from school, and then followed the next day.

My grandparents have always been so proud and incredibly supportive - present at every milestone, big and small - from birthday parties as a child to my installation here at KKBE. Perhaps I've been spoiled because I'm the oldest, the first grandchild - but more likely it's just because of who they are and how they love their family. I remember when they came down to New Orleans for my graduation from Tulane. We were up in their hotel room and they handed me a card. I read the message, beautiful words of encouragement as I followed my chosen path to rabbinical school later that summer. And when I looked up from the card, with tears in my

eyes, my grandfather was in the corner, bawling. It's quite possible we're related to the Olasovs, Glasses or Richeks, because my grandfather can tear up at the drop of a hat. But, boy, was he proud. He only had one concern about my rabbinic studies: "Who's going to marry a rabbi?" he asked. Thank goodness I met Aaron, and we all do thank goodness for Aaron for so many reasons every day. I was telling the nurse in Grandpa's hospital room that he and my grandmother have nine grandchildren, but Grandma corrected me: "Two of them are married," she said, "so we have eleven grandchildren, and three beautiful great-grandchildren, too."

They have loved and supported each of us in so many ways, at so many times. And so those of us who could converged together in St. Louis to love and support them. We put our arms around my grandmother; we held the hands of my grandfather. And we prayed, and we hoped ... and held and hold on. Because Grandpa is fighting. His body is doing all that it can to heal, and his doctors and nurses are doing all they can to help. And you'll have to forgive me if I left a big part of my heart back there in St. Louis with them - but life and our loved ones are just so very precious. It's impossible to cherish them enough. But, by all means, let's do the very best we can.

There's a story I've shared before, but it's worth sharing again.<sup>1</sup> It speaks of three demons who come together to compare results in their efforts to corrupt human beings.

The first one says: "I tell people that there is no God. But it doesn't work. People are too smart. They see the wonders of the world so they don't believe me."

The second one says: "I tell people that there is a God but that He didn't give the Torah. But it doesn't work. People are too smart. They look into the Torah and see how much wisdom and guidance it contains. And so they don't believe me."

The third one says: "I tell people that there is a God and that He did give the Torah. But then I say to them, 'What's the rush? You have time to do what God wants; you can do what's important tomorrow' - and *that* almost always works."

Friends, who knows what tomorrow will bring. *Unetaneh tokef* – anything is possible. But in the meantime, today holds so much promise. God, awaken our senses - especially our sense of urgency. Guide us and protect us that we may live in the moment; don't let us wait. Help us to savor the sweetness in each day, fill our days to their fullest, and each and every day to cherish those we love. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Shared by Rabbi Jack Riemer in *The World of the High Holy Days*.