

Our Book of Life

Rosh Hashanah Morning - September 29, 2011
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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At the end of May, a few months ago, I was in my hometown of Long Beach, California. It was Memorial Day weekend, and I was at my parents' house, to accomplish one specific task – to clear out all the stuff, all the chazzerei, that had accumulated in their home over the course of fifty years.

My parents no longer live at 5920 Los Arcos, their 4 bedroom house purchased in 1953 for the grand total of \$13,500. Almost a year ago, they moved to an assisted living facility further south in San Diego, only 10 minutes away from my brother, Marty.

Over the course of the first two months that my parents were in San Diego, we managed to move most of their personal belongings from Long Beach into their new two-bedroom apartment. But there were tons of items left in their old house. Bear in mind, my parents grew-up during the Depression and they never wanted to get rid of anything, lest there would be a need for it sometime later. My dad often complained about all the

decades old items crammed into the garage but my mom would say, “Arnie, you never know when we might need those wicker baskets.” And truthfully, my dad was not much better at getting rid of his oldest possessions. His collection of ties might have looked snazzy say about thirty years ago. When my parents decided it was time to sell their house, it fell to Arnie and Birdie’s four sons to get the house ready for market. This meant for three days during Memorial Day Weekend, my brothers, David, Marty, Jay, and I would have to go through the entire house and garage. Looking through every nook and cranny, we had to decide if there was anything else our parents might wish to hold onto, as well as choosing personal items each of us might want to keep. We also needed to decide what would be designated for an estate sale, and lastly, what items if left after the sale, would be given to charity.

Last Memorial Day weekend was an unforgettable experience. You would think that a 2000 square foot house could not hold so much stuff, but it did. Going through everything in the house was, at times, exhausting and yet at other moments it was exhilarating, especially when we found an unknown treasure. Packed away in a suitcase in the garage we discovered our dad’s Air Force uniform from 1948, still neatly pressed. We found our mother’s vintage violin, which she once played so beautifully.

We came across hilarious photographs of each other, pictures of all four of us with heaps of curly hair, gigantic beards, and wearing scruffy shirts.

On the second morning of our expedition, I discovered something that blew me away. I was in the front bedroom of the house, which I occupied during my high school years. Tucked away in a corner, underneath a simple lamp stand, I found something I did not even know existed. It was my baby book. This book, created by my mother, contained the first photographs ever of me as a baby, along with records of my height and weight over the first year of my life. And then, underneath my baby book, I brought to light even more mementos from my life: my earliest drawings as a preschooler, report cards from public school, certificates of merit from religious school, a box containing all the cards I received for my Bar Mitzvah. I uncovered my notebook from my AP United States history class, along with my study notes written out on index cards. I found a file from thirty years ago that contained receipts for the expenses my parents incurred for hosting a reception at the Elks Club in Long Beach after Eve and I were married. I discovered a box containing every sermon I sent my parents, as well as columns I wrote for Temple newsletters. On my second morning in my parents' home during Memorial Day weekend, I discovered that my parents had kept an archive of my life, and I never knew it.

It felt good to know that my parents cared about me so much that they wanted to preserve these mementos from different stages of my life. My parents had kept this tangible evidence as if to demonstrate the arc of my life, from infant to child, from adolescent to young adult, from undergraduate student to rabbinic student, from being single to being married.

Not surprisingly, in the course of the second day, my three brothers found similar kinds of items about their lives. They too were touched by these discoveries.

I want to believe that my parents held onto these items not only because they did not have the inclination to get rid of anything, but also more significantly, on some level, they could preserve tangible evidence of how much they reveled in their sons' growth, in our maturation, and in our accomplishments. To an important degree, these hidden treasures not only were buried to eventually be discovered by their sons, but these mementos also serve as reminders of who our parents were in their most vital years.

Arnie and Birdie Schulman were the parents of four active boys, who loved us and encouraged us and supported us in every way. Their pride in their four sons - the oldest a lawyer, the second a rabbi, the third a doctor,

the youngest a teacher – knew no bounds. Our parents modeled for each of us how to be caring human beings, to be supportive members of a mishpocha that extended beyond immediate family. My parents were committed Jews, active at Temple Israel and in the greater Long Beach Jewish community.

During Memorial Day weekend, my three brothers and I found precious reminders of our own history, but evidence as well of our parents' vitality and strength. In the geniza of the Schulman family home, we uncovered certain truths about ourselves and about our parents. There were moments of joy mixed-in with sorrow as well.

Over the course of our three days during Memorial weekend, we were reminded of how energetic and dynamic our mom and dad had once been. My parents are, thank God, still alive, but over the course of the last number of years, their vitality and strength have diminished. My mom has had a series of health challenges – diabetes, infections, falls, broken bones, and now Parkinson's disease. At one point it seemed like my mom was on an endless merry go round, from living with my dad, to trips to the hospital, and then stints of rehabilitation in a skilled nursing facility. Twice in this past year, in November and in January, she came very close to dying.

As for my dad, at the age of 85, he is in remarkably good physical health. But his short-term memory is shot. Sit down for lunch with him in the communal dining room and he will chat amiably with other residents. But ask him an hour later what he ate or who was seated with him and he will not be able to remember. Events that took place decades ago, he can recall with startling clarity. Yet his memory of a day or an hour is unreliable, his mind is fading, slowly but surely.

My parents, once so vital and full of life, have weakened. They no longer call to ask how I am; they no longer send my children birthday cards. Deep down, I know that they still love us, but they can no longer summon the strength to reach out.

It is painful to see my parents diminished and I know that this is an emotion shared by many others in our congregation. There are many adults in our synagogue who have parents who are aging, who no longer have the capacity to completely care for themselves. Some parents face distinct physical challenges. Yet at least many of the physical ailments of aging can respond to treatment. But when a parent suffers from dementia, or worse, Alzheimer's, we experience the disappearance of the person we once knew. The body remains intact, but the mind that once sparkled with intelligence, the person who laughed at a clever joke, the parent who

nurtured us to do our best, is no longer there. We are left with ghost traces of our loved one that may emerge at unexpected moments. A greeting of *Shalom Aleichem* may unlock a torrent of Yiddish; singing a melody from a show tune from the 1940's: *Meet me in St. Louis* may draw a smile.

It is not only members of our family who face these challenges; members of our congregation struggle with the same maladies. As mental faculties diminish, some rage at their inability to do what used to come so easily. The slogan, "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste," is so very true, and when you are aware that it is your own mind that is wasting away, it can lead to frustration, anger, and bitterness.

For many older members of our synagogue, struggling to accomplish even the simple matters of life, cooking a meal, driving a car, going out to a restaurant, coming to shul, grow more challenging as we age. We recall the words of the psalmist who cried out, *Al Tashlicheini L'eit Zikna*, which means "Do not cast me out in my old age." At its core, the psalmist expresses the terrible fear that as one ages, one will be disregarded, rendered insignificant, become less than human.

The greatest fear as we age is not death. Death we all know is the fate of every living creature on earth. But what we truly fear is isolation and

disconnection from those we love. Ailments, both physical and mental, remove us from the core of our family and our community. We become more peripheral, less involved, less active. Growing older, we fear, can distance us from those we love. That is the primary angst of our aging. We fear that we will be forgotten, that our lives will vanish like vapor. The opening words of the book of Ecclesiastes reads, *Hevel havalim amar Kohelet, hevel havalim hakol hevel*. “We are mere breath,” says Kohelet, “mere breath.” All life is like vapor that quickly vanishes. Shakespeare expresses the desperate sense that all human activity is futile in his immortal play, *Macbeth*. Upon hearing of the death of the queen, Macbeth laments:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in its petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*

Signifying nothing.

It is a hard thing to come to terms with our own limitations.

Aging and isolation, fear of abandonment, the diminishment of mind, the shrinking of body, are realities that few of us have the courage to face.

The younger members of our congregation might be listening and thinking:

the best years of our lives lie ahead of us. They might wonder, how is it

possible to feel isolation, when in this digital age of Skype, Facetime,

Facebook, and other forms of social media, people are connecting to a web

of friends not just locally but throughout the world? Why utter depressing

thoughts about life, when the future feels so full of endless possibility?

Why linger over old photographs in a baby book when Facebook is about to

unveil its new Timeline? Within a few weeks, on your Facebook page, you

will be able to embed on your profile a timeline, allowing anyone of your

friends to click to view photographs, video, and other depictions of every

stage of your life. Timeline will allow you to curate your own biography,

allowing you to highlight important events, and graph recurring themes and

identify connections to every person who has ever mattered in your life.

Maybe Facebook and social media will solve the existential issues

that confront us in life. But I doubt it. Even with all the time we spend

online, most of us, at the end of the day, have to shut off our computers or our smart phones and face the tasks at hand. Social media can never answer the fundamental questions we face: What does it mean to be alive? How should I live my life? How do I face my own mortality and those I love? These are the ultimate concerns we are especially compelled to confront during these Days of Awe.

During this time of year, we speak of God opening the Book of Life, and writing and inscribing us for the New Year that has begun. I have long struggled with this metaphor of a Divine Judge that sets our fate for the year to come. However, perhaps there is a lesson from my experience at my parents' house last May that has meaning not only for me, but for you as well. During Memorial Day weekend, at my parents' house in Long Beach, I discovered a collection of reminders of who I was and what I have done with my life. I discovered a veritable Book of my Life.

Rosh Hashanah is called in our tradition, Yom HaZicharon, it is a Day for Remembering, it is Memorial Day. During this sacred time, we utilize a metaphor that evokes a belief in a higher power. We remind ourselves that God opens our book of life on this day of Rosh Hashanah. We can think of God less as a stern judge and more like a Divine parent who loves us and wants to keep our earliest mementos, a record of our achievements,

and evidence of our successes. During this season we call God *Avinu Malkeinu*, our heavenly Parent who is hovering over our book of life and it is we who have the choice what we want to color in it, what we want to write in it, and what good deeds we want recorded.

On Rosh Hashanah we blow the shofar loud and long, to awaken us from our dormancy. We blow tekiah – so that we hear in our hearts and souls who we truly are, Jews, people called upon to do justice, practice mercy, and walk humbly with God. We come together on Rosh Hashanah to erase our misdeeds of the past year and to reinvigorate our souls. We come together as a community and pray and worship and sing and laugh and hug – to reconnect with each other as a community.

Today is a day for remembering. Hayom Yom Hazikaron, let us remember who we truly are and let us not forget those in our community who feel isolated; the aged and the weak; the sick and infirmed; the sad and the lonely; the bereaved and the bereft. Let us open our hearts and our homes, widening the doors of compassion, seeking to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bind up the wounds within us, our families, our city, our nation, and our world.

Isolated and alone, we feel despair. Connected and purposeful, we can set ourselves on a course for the New Year that will be filled with

blessings. May we find compassion for those in need and strength to serve those who need us. May we be quick to forgive the inadequacies of others and may we also forgive ourselves for our own shortcomings. May our good deeds and righteous living, our prayers and our repentance, inscribe us in the divine Book of Life. May we be blessed in a Book of Life -- *Zecher Tzaddikim Livracha* – remembered as good people whose lives will be beacons of blessings for the living and for our descendents.

Amen

