

Have any of you seen a short animated feature called “Innerworkings?” If you have not, I highly recommend it. It is the best depiction of choosing to make the most of out of life that I have ever seen. It can easily be found on YouTube and if you watch it, let me know because I would love to discuss it with you.

The feature “Innerworkings” starts by showing an animated man waking up to the sound of his alarm clock. He begins to go through his morning wake up rituals – stretching, going to the bathroom, getting into the shower etc. These are rituals we do every single day. However, what is unusual about this man’s day as he does his morning wake-ups, we see him imagining his death over and over again. The first time occurs when he is dancing in the shower listening to music, then he imagines himself slipping in the shower and he sees his own coffin. Next, he considers eating delicious pancakes for breakfast. But in his mind if he eats the pancakes, then he will want to eat all sorts of other food and again it becomes a step towards his death.

This happens over and over throughout his day. Each time he has a choice of doing something fun or different, but he imagines it eventually leading to his death and sticks to his routine. We see him dragging himself to the office which is gray and devoid of light. As he takes his dreary walk to work, he passes people laughing and having fun, enjoying a beautiful beach. Again and again out of fear, anxiety or simply comfort in routine, he chooses to stay in a life that is making him miserable; a life where he is not really living, connecting with others or doing things that bring him joy. After declining to do any of the enjoyable things he considers, he images himself at an old age climbing sadly into his coffin alone with no one around to mourn him.

Finally, this is the last straw and he decides he is ready to make a change. Instead of eating his bag lunch at his desk, he chooses to go outside, eats pancakes, talks to a woman and jumps into the ocean. He engages with the vibrant life around him. When he comes back to the office, he is refreshed and dancing. The man’s new energy immediately inspires coworkers around him to enjoy their lives as well. At the end of the short, there is new light and color in the office and everyone is dancing. The film ends with pictures of the new life the man has created for himself. In “Innerworkings” one man makes a change, when he chooses life. Instead of settling for a life governed by fear, or staying safe, he takes a risk and decides how he wants to live. He purposefully and intentionally chooses life.

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – choose life. We will read these words from the Torah later this morning. The text reads: “This day, I call upon heaven and earth to witness regarding you: life and death I have set before you...Choose life – so that you and your children may live. For God gives you life and the length of your days to dwell upon the land.”

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – choose life.

It sounds easy to choose life, no problem, right? But it can feel difficult to do. Because there are times in our lives when we all feel like the man in “Innerworkings.” Times we feel the weighed down by the routines of our lives. Times when we want to make changes but fear what will happen if it does not work out. This fear can paralyze us so all we can do is daydream about the life we wish we had.

To avoid this, the question we ask ourselves today on this day of all days is: “how do I want to live my life?” That is the core of the High Holy Days.

In these words, *U’Vacharta B Chayim* – choose life we are being encouraged not only to choose life over death, but to live a meaningful and well lived life. In every decision we make large or small, we are being urged to choose to really live.

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – choose life.

These two words seem simple and perhaps a little obvious in their message – but, if it was so easy, why don’t more of us do it? What is holding us back from truly living the lives that we want to live?

When addressing a graduating class of Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace argued against the “unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race” of life. He begins his speech with a parable: “there are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way who nods at them and says, ‘Morning boys. How’s the water?’” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them look over at the other and says: “What is water?”

I share this parable as a reminder that we are not like fish. We do not need to spend our time without realizing that we are metaphorically surrounded by water. Instead the words *U’Vacharta B Chayim* urge us to be aware of the water of our lives and to use it in meaningful ways.

The person who modeled this for me, is my grandfather, Joseph. He was my mother’s father, who unfortunately died when I was two years old. My grandpa Joe was an optimistic and upbeat person. He always saw the best in everyone and found hope even in dark times. Grandpa Joe was so vivacious that a few months before he died, when he was already sick from cancer, he bought himself a new gold watch. Although he was ailing at the time, there were still tasks he wanted to accomplish and places he wanted to go. He wanted to do these things on time and this new watch was going to help him do it. My mother says this summed up his attitude towards life and how he lived it. He had a quiet, thoughtful demeanor with a witty sense of humor. He was creative, kind and intellectual.

Based on his approach to life, it would have been easy to miss all of his struggles and heartache.

My grandpa Joe was born in England. He was from a big close family as one of ten siblings. When he came to America as a young man, he knew it would be years, if ever, before he would see his family again. This separation from his family was a big

sacrifice for him and he missed them terribly. Through letters they stayed in touch as best they could and were reunited with some of them many years later.

As an artist employment was hard to come by for him, but he worked hard to make ends meet. In the US he met my grandmother, an immigrant from Germany, and late in life they had my mother. He loved being a father to my mother with the embracing the joys that parenthood can bring.

Besides his family, the thing my grandfather loved most in this world was reading. A love of reading is always admirable, but it was even more impressive for my grandfather because he was completely blind in one eye and almost blind in the other. He loved to read but his failing eyesight made this love difficult for him to do.

But, if my grandfather held his book in a specific way, despite his vision difficulties he could read. My mother tells stories of my grandfather sitting in his chair, holding his book, reading for hours and hours on end. Even with 10% vision, he still found a way to do what he loved. He remained upbeat and optimistic his whole life despite the challenges he faced. He chose life at every turn.

Who in your life models choosing life for you?

As we think those who model choosing life for us, we also begin to consider the legacies we leave behind. Contemplating our legacies and the liturgy of High Holy Days force us to think about our mortality. The truth is, none of us are going to live forever. We know this is true yet, rarely do we like to think about it or dwell on this truth. We know the length of our days is not up to us. We know we have finite control over how long we live and we all know people whose lives were cut too short. Yet even knowing these truths, for most of us the majority of the time, we ignore them. We choose to not think about our own deaths, yet, that is exactly what we are asked to do on the High Holy Days. We come face to face with this reality.

For example, the Una Tanah Tokef prayer asks over and over again who is who shall live and who shall die. This directly vocalizes our fears and existential questions. It forces to acknowledge our lack of control over our lives and especially the length of our days.

In an introduction to a book about Musser, a Jewish self-help of sorts, opens by saying: "every single thing within this book is already known to everyone reading it. There is absolutely nothing new inside. Instead, the book contains truths which we all know, constantly forget or ignore, and therefore we are in need reminders of them."

To help us face our mortality, I have heard about an exercise where people are asked to write their own eulogies. I am sure many of you have even participated in them. This is not as morbid as it sounds, because in thinking about our own eulogies, we have the opportunity to reflect on our lives and ask ourselves the important questions. It also reminds us to appreciate all of the good things and blessings in our lives.

In this exercise, we begin by asking what will people say about us when we are no longer here. This leads us to consider if we are living up the values we aspire to. If we

are treating the important people in our lives the way they should be treated and we spend our time well.

These ideas often become reality when I sit with a loved one before a funeral or a shiva minyan. In those moments, I ask to learn about the person who has passed away. Over the years, I have heard amazing stories of triumph over difficulties, about unthinkable risks people took, and unique life paths. Mostly often what I hear about is unconditional love. Usually a big smile comes to the face of a story teller as they remember a favorite dish the person loved to cook, or funny thing they used to do. I often hear about the joy that Jewish holidays brought them or their special gift giving style. In all of my years of sitting with loved ones, what comes to mind before a funeral isn't financial success or career accomplishments, yes those things are important, but what loved ones share with me is values the person lived by, memories they shared and of the love they will keep with them.

On this theme, there is a discussion in Talmud where the rabbis are debating what questions God will ask you when you arrive in heaven. The rabbis wondered what will God want to know. We might assume the questions would be about how much time we spent praying or observing the Jewish holidays, but instead the rabbi suggested God will ask us these four questions.

Do you set aside time for learning Torah?

Do you devote yourself to family?

Do you do business with integrity?

Do you have hope?"

These questions help us focus on what is most important about how we live our lives and reminds us that we can always change our ways. It is never too late to begin to choose life.

In a TED Talk by the best-selling author Cal Honore described a scene in his home most likely familiar to many. He was torn between a busy successful career and spending time with his family. This was especially true at his young son's bedtime so he bought a book that he thought would solve his problem called "one minute bedtime stories." He was very proud of himself about this, because now he could read to his son every night while allocating one whole minute to the story. However, even the one minute felt too long to him, so soon he found himself skipping half of the story – instead reading spending quality time with his son, or even reading a one minute story, he was only giving his son a thirty second bedtime story. Then one night he found himself frustrated that the thirty second story was taking too long. That night Cal realized he had it all wrong and became horrified at himself. He loves his son and couldn't believe he was not able to give thirty seconds for bedtime stories with him. He realized he was not living the life he wanted or spending time ways that matter. Luckily he was in a

position where he could make big changes and his TED Talk is called “What Happens when we slow down.”

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – Choose life

Choose to live a meaningful and well lived life.

Each and every person will have a different definition to what choosing life means for them. Every person will choose life their own way, but these words urge each of us to figure out to what it means for us individually. In facing our own mortality, the High Holy Days inspire to aspire us to live well lived lives.

At the end of his Ted Talk Cal Honore said: “Now I feel happier, healthier, more productive than I ever have before. I feel like I am living my life not racing through it. My relationships are deeper, stronger, richer and now reading bedtime stories to my son is the reward at the end the day.”

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This is not intended to be just theoretical, instead we are supposed to be put our reflections into practice. To symbolize this, Jewish law teaches that it is meritorious at start to build a sukkah on after we break the fast Yom Kippur. What a beautiful symbol of putting our intentions of choosing life into action.

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – Choose Life

We can change, we can appreciate all of the blessings in our lives and choose life each and every single day.

*U’Vacharta B Chayim* – Choose life

Choose to live a meaningful and well lived life.

*U’Vacharta B Chayim*

We can choose to live a meaningful and well lived life.

Amen

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