

Rabbi Rachel Joseph
 Congregation Beth Israel
 Kol Nidre 5787
 “And Still, We Bless This Life”

I have a confession to make on this night of confession: I am not naturally a grateful person.

I am not a glass-half-full person. I am usually the person wondering why the glass is half-empty, who drank it, and who is going to be responsible for filling it back up.

This may be genetic.

In my family, we have our own birthday song. It might sound familiar to some. It goes: “Happy birthday, happy birthday, people dying everywhere, grief and sorrow in the air, but happy birthday, happy birthday.”

That is the whole song.

Nothing says “We are so glad you were born” quite like reminding you that people are dying everywhere. It is ridiculous, and we laugh every time we sing it. And, this profoundly depressing birthday song -- that my children now sing to their friends -- may contain an entire theology.

It does not pretend that life is easy. It does not ask us to ignore grief or look away from suffering. Yes, people are dying, and yes, grief and sorrow are in the air. AND, STILL, happy birthday. Still, we celebrate that you were born, still we gather around you, still, we light candles, eat cake, and mark the gift of another year.

That is the kind of gratitude I understand. Not the gratitude of the person who naturally sees the glass as half full or denies everything painful or frightening. Gratitude that looks directly at the fragility of life and says: This life is still worthy of celebration.

And, for that gratitude to be honest, it must make room for everything that hurts. So I want to be clear about what I am asking of us tonight. I am not going to tell you to be more thankful. I am certainly not going to stand here and suggest that if we simply counted our blessings, the pain of this year would disappear. There are burdens in this sanctuary that cannot be transformed by a gratitude journal.

There are people here grieving someone whose absence has changed the shape of their world. There are people worried about their health or the health of someone they love. There are relationships that have fractured, dreams that have not come true, and apologies that may never be offered or accepted.

There is much to fear and mourn, and there is much that needs to be repaired. To respond to any of that by saying, “Just be grateful,” would be spiritually shallow and, at times, morally offensive. That is not what tonight is about.

Tonight is about something deeper. Tonight is about the gravity of being alive. It is about the responsibility that comes with having been given another year, another day, another breath. It is about refusing to allow all that is frightening and broken to become the only truth we can see.

Tonight is not about becoming more grateful, it is about becoming more intentional. It is about learning to say, with our eyes wide open to everything: And still, we bless this life.

Jewish tradition teaches gratitude as a way of meeting the terrifying, astonishing fact that our lives are finite, fragile, and not entirely our own. And, Kol Nidre makes that truth impossible to avoid. We stand together as the sun sets. The Torah scrolls are lifted from the ark. The melody reaches backward through generations. We hear words that remind us of promises made and broken, of the distance between the people we hoped to be and the people we have actually been. And beneath all those words is an even more unsettling truth: We do not know how much time we have.

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see the fullness of their days and who shall not. We do not need to read those words literally to understand their truth -- we know life changes without asking our permission. A phone rings... a relationship ends... a diagnosis redraws the future. Kol Nidre does not protect us from that knowledge, it places us directly before it.

But Yom Kippur does not bring us face-to-face with mortality in order to terrify us. It does so because we are so skilled at forgetting. We live as if there will always be another conversation. We postpone what matters because the urgent crowds out the important. We allow years to pass while waiting for a more convenient time to become the people we mean to be.

Then Kol Nidre arrives, with its ancient melody and its open ark, and says: Pay attention. This life is precious precisely because it does not last forever. The people beside you will not always be beside you. You will not always be able to say the words you need to say or have the chance to do the good that only you can do.

That is the gravity of this night and that is also where gratitude begins. Gratitude begins with recognizing that everything is passing. And understanding what has been entrusted to us while we are here.

Judaism has never left this recognition to chance. It has built practices into the structure of our days that force us to stop, if only for a moment, and notice that we are alive. It's our Jewish toolbox 🧰 that I spoke about last year. We bless our food before we eat it. We bless the shabbat candles. We bless the sight of a rainbow and the sound of thunder. We offer a blessing when we encounter something beautiful, when we taste a new fruit, when we survive danger. We even offer a blessing after using the bathroom.

Judaism is almost comically specific in its determination that we do not sleepwalk through our lives. It does not assume that we will naturally notice what is sacred, so it interrupts us and say, hey, pay attention, this happened, say a blessing, don't miss it.

I am grateful for these rituals precisely because gratitude does not come naturally to me. Judaism does not wait for me to feel appreciative, or ask me to manufacture an emotion I don't feel. It places words in my mouth until, sometimes, my heart catches up. The practice comes before the feeling. The tradition leads us where we may not know how to go on our own.

One of the first prayers Judaism gives us each morning is called Modeh Ani: "Modeh ani lefanecha, Melech chai v'kayam, shehechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah, rabbah emunatecha." "I give thanks before You, living and enduring God, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me. Great is Your faithfulness."

It is a strange prayer when you think about it. It is spoken before we have accomplished anything. We wake up, and before we know what the day will demand of us, we say: Thank you, my soul has been returned to me, I have been given another day.

I would love to tell you that I wake-up each morning, sit peacefully on the edge of the bed, and whisper Modah Ani with perfect spiritual intention. I do not. Most mornings, my mind begins assembling the day's to-do list before my feet touch the floor. Often I reach for my phone before I reach for gratitude. This is exactly why I need the prayer. It catches me before the day can convince me that I am only as valuable as what I accomplish in it.

There is a beautiful Hasidic teaching that says that every morning God returns our soul to us because God believes we are still capable of goodness. Think about that. Before you have accomplished anything, God, however you understand that concept, has already invested another day in you. Before you have proven that you deserve it, your soul has been returned.

The question then becomes, what are you going to do with that trust?

We usually translate the final words of Modeh Ani, "rabbah emunatecha," as "great is Your faithfulness." But the word emunah can also mean trust. The prayer can be heard as saying: Great is Your trust in us.

We wake in the morning because God trusts us and has not given up on us. Every sunrise is, in that sense, a vote of confidence. Every awakening is God's way of saying: You are not finished yet. There is more to repair, more love to give, and goodness that can enter the world only through you. And so every morning God asks us a question: Will you believe about yourself what I already believe about you?

And, Yom Kippur requires us to confront the reasons we may not believe in our own capacity for goodness. We know the promises we did not keep, the patterns we meant to change, and the people we disappointed. The vidui, the confessions, are written in the plural, but each of us brings a private accounting into this room.

So, it would be easy for a night like this to collapse into shame. But shame is not the purpose of Yom Kippur. Shame tells us that we are nothing more than the worst thing we have done. Judaism tells us that we are always more than that. The purpose of confession is not humiliation, it is truth.

We tell the truth about ourselves because change becomes possible only when we stop pretending. And the God before whom we confess is the same God who returned our souls to us this morning. The God of judgment is also the God of trust.

Yom Kippur asks us to hold those truths together. What we do matters profoundly, and we are not reducible to what we have done. We are accountable, and we are capable of change. We have failed, and God has not finished with us. That is why teshuvah means return.

We are not asked to invent an entirely new self. We are asked to return to what is deepest and truest within us. We return to the person we might still become.

One of the most profound expressions of vidui, confession, I have ever witnessed appears in the documentary *Last Flight Home*. My colleague, Rabbi Rachel Timoner, sits beside her dying father and guides him through the words of confession we recite at the end of life. He speaks about the mistakes he made in business and the financial consequences that rippled through his family. Through tears streaming down his face, he says that he feels he failed them.

But then his family offers him a different accounting of his life. One by one, his children, grandchildren, caregivers, former colleagues, and friends tell him what his life meant to them. No one pretends his mistakes or choices had no consequences. But they refuse to allow those failures to become the final measure of his life. Each person talks about what he means to them, about his character, his values, his love, and the ways his soul shaped their own.

He had spent decades carrying the story that his worst failure was his truest legacy. His family helped him see the wider truth: the ripples of a life travel in more than one direction. There was harm he needed to make peace with and there was also goodness he had planted in other people, goodness that would continue after he was gone. And finally, he was able to let go.

That is the work of vidui, not only at the end of life, but on Yom Kippur. We tell the truth about what we have done without believing that our failures are the whole truth about who we are. We acknowledge the harm that has rippled outward from our choices. And we also remember that love, courage, generosity, and presence ripple outward too.

That is why God returns our souls to us. Because the final accounting has not yet been made and there is still time to decide what we will send outward from the life we have been given.

I know that not everyone in this sanctuary believes in a God who literally returns our souls each morning, or in a God who places trust in us. However we understand it, the essential truth remains: We are here, another day has arrived, and with it, another chance to shape what our lives will mean.

The poet Mary Oliver asked, “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” It is a beautiful question. What is your life for? What do you owe the people who love you? What do you owe the world that will remain after you are gone? What do you owe the generations who kept this tradition alive so that its words could reach you tonight? What does God hope you will do with the soul that keeps returning? A precious life is not only a gift, it is a responsibility. Our lives are our own, and they are also bound to something beyond ourselves.

Most of the time, we imagine that a meaningful life must be built out of extraordinary moments. But Judaism locates holiness in the everyday, in what we do repeatedly. There is a quiet defiance in ordinary Jewish life. Every Shabbat candle says that the week does not own us. Every child welcomed into the covenant says that we believe there will be a Jewish future. Every Kaddish says that death does not sever the bonds of memory. Every gathering like this one says that we have not surrendered our story.

That is the defiance hidden inside my family’s terrible birthday song. People are dying, grief and sorrow are in the air, we know this. And still, we celebrate a life; still, we gather; still, we bless. Not because darkness is unreal, but because we refuse to let it have the last word.

I often talk about gratitude being an act of resistance. Gratitude is not a claim that everything is good. It is a refusal to let what is terrible become everything. It does not turn us away from suffering; true gratitude turns us toward responsibility. If I recognize my life as a gift, then I must ask how I will use it. If I am grateful that Jewish community has been there for me, I must help ensure that it will be there for those who come after me. Jewish gratitude is covenantal. It binds us to action. And remarkably, gratitude is bound up in the very name by which we are known.

In the Book of Genesis, Leah gives birth to her fourth son and names him Yehudah, Judah. She explains, “Ha’pa’am odeh et Adonai -- This time, I will thank God.” Yehudah comes from the same Hebrew root as *hoda’ah*, gratitude or acknowledgment.

And we are Yehudim, Jews.

Of all the names we might have inherited, this is the one that endured. Our very name means: We are the people who give thanks. But the context matters. Leah does not speak these words from within an easy life. She is the less-loved wife of Jacob. With each of her first three sons, she hopes that perhaps now Jacob will see her, love her, and become attached to her. Each child’s name carries the ache of something still missing. Then Judah is born, and something shifts: “This time I will thank God.”

Leah does not say that everything is now all right. Her gratitude does not erase her loneliness. She simply refuses to allow what is missing to prevent her from recognizing what is present. This is not the gratitude of the glass-half-full person. It is gratitude within a life that remains unresolved. Leah holds grief and blessing at the same time. And, from that complicated, courageous acknowledgment comes the name of her son and ultimately the name of our people.

To be a Jew, then, is to inherit Leah's capacity to name gratitude and blessing, even when life is not what we hoped it would be. That is the quiet defiance written into our name.

And, that is what being Yehudim, Jews, asks of us, not to stop seeing what is missing, but to refuse to only see what is missing.

I am not naturally a grateful person. And, I doubt that will change simply because I preached a sermon about gratitude. Tomorrow morning, I will probably still notice what is unfinished. I will still worry. I will still see the cracks.

But Judaism does not require me to become a different kind of person. It requires me to become more intentional about the person I already am. I can see the crack and still bless the light that enters through it. I can allow Jewish ritual to lead me toward truths my instincts do not always find on their own.

Tomorrow morning, if all goes well, your soul will be returned to you again. Not because you were the best at repenting tonight. Your soul will be returned because God still believes there is goodness you can bring into this world.

People are dying, grief and sorrow are in the air, we know that; Yom Kippur will not let us forget it. And still, we have been given this day.

May we believe about ourselves what God believes about us. May we receive this one precious life with gratitude, answer it with responsibility, and use it to bring whatever goodness is ours to bring.

God is not finished with us and neither are we.

G'mar chatimah tovah -- May you be inscribed for a good year!