

Yom Kippur Morning Sermon  
“Self Care”  
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“Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome aboard UM Hillel Flight 1836 bound for real life. Our captain, God, has informed us that our flying time will be approximately 120 years give or take a few. At this time, we want to review with you some of the safety features of our aircraft. You can follow along with the laminated card in the seat pocket in front of you. During landing and takeoff we ask that you keep your seat back in the full and upright position and that your tray table be stowed and locked. There are six exits, two at the front of the aircraft, two over each of the wings and one at the rear of the aircraft. In case of emergency, floor lighting will direct you to the exit nearest you. In the unlikely event of cabin depressurization, an oxygen mask will automatically appear in front of you. To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask towards you. Place it firmly over your nose and mouth, secure the elastic band behind your head, and breathe normally. Although the bag may not inflate, oxygen is flowing to the mask. If you are travelling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your mask first, and then assist the other person.”

How many of us actually stop to truly listen to the safety message before we fly? I, for one, rarely pay attention from beginning to end and I have a sneaking suspicion that many of you don't either. So today I want to reflect with you on the profound wisdom that we hear at the beginning of each flight.

“Secure your mask first, and then assist the other person.” On the surface this safety instruction makes perfect sense. When flying at such high altitudes, we may lose consciousness rather quickly. Yet for many of us, our natural caregiving instinct would be to help others first

which is in direct conflict with the safety instructions. But of course listening to the safety instructions is the smart thing to do. We need to put on our own oxygen mask first, or we won't even have the chance to help anyone else. So while we should live in a world where we help others, we have to first muster up the strength to help ourselves.

Judaism has a lot to say about our health. In fact prayers of personal and communal healing are so important that they are found within our prayer book and holy texts. In our daily Amidah we pray, "Heal us, Lord, and we shall be healed...Bring complete recovery for all our ailments for You, God, King, are a faithful and compassionate Healer..." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom says with this blessing "We pray that medical treatment be successful, and that God Himself be part of the healing process."<sup>1</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law, makes the point very simply: "If the physician withholds his services, it is considered as shedding blood"<sup>2</sup> We learn from this that doctors are obligated to provide healing to their citizens. Finally as a Jewish community we have a responsibility towards our neighbors. We are told, "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is being spilled."<sup>3</sup>

At this time of the year as we prepare for the Gates of Heaven to close and when we ask God to seal us into the Book of Life, we are even more hyper aware of our health. During this election season we are once again talking about health care, Obamacare, and the candidates proposed changes the Affordable Care Act. Regardless of where you stand on these issues, the one thing that we are not hearing enough about is Self Care. During this season of *teshuvah*, of turning and returning, we must not neglect how important self-care can be. Just as our prayer book enables us to pray for healing, and the *Shulchan Aruch* teaches that a doctor is obligated to

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<sup>1</sup> Koren Sacks Siddur, 118-119

<sup>2</sup> S.A., Yoreh Dei-ah 336:1

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:16

heal, we must remember that with God's help, we are responsible for each other but we are also responsible for ourselves. If one ignores self-care, then one's overall health care will become unbalanced and ultimately collapse.

One of the central prayers of the High Holy Day morning liturgy is the *U'netaneh Tokef*. This prayer which speaks about the fragility of life is attributed Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, who, according to legend, composed it as he lay dying in martyrdom about 1000 years ago. With his dying breath, he uttered the words that we now know of as the *U'netaneh Tokef*.

This prayer portrays God as a Shepherd over His flock, counting and examining each sheep one by one as they pass under His rod; so too does God review the flock of humanity one by one, determining each individual's fate for the coming year. But the good news is we are not just helpless sheep. It is our task to help change our verdict by altering our behavior towards God, humanity, and ourselves. I believe that we can accomplish our goal of self-care by acting on the final words of the *U'netaneh Tokef*, "Repentance, Prayer, and Acts of Righteousness temper judgment's severe decree."

### **Repentance**

Yom Kippur is a day of self-reflection when we as Jews do *teshuvah* by returning to our God, our values, our ideals, and our truest self. Maimonides, our medieval sage, articulates in *Hilchot Teshuvah*—the Laws of Repentance, the five steps one must take in order to bring about full *teshuvah*:

#### 1. Recognition

The hardest thing to do is to admit to ourselves that we are wrong. But trust me if we don't believe that we have done anything wrong then our eventual apology to others and ourselves will be in vain. Once we acknowledge our faults we must be ready to abandon them.

## 2. Renunciation

This step requires that we modify our behavior. Since action is fundamental to Judaism we must change who we are and what we did in the past in order to bring about a positive result in the future.

If the first two steps are about introspection then the final three steps are about our outward behavior.

## 3. Confession

We make our transgressions real when we admit them out loud. It is not enough to own up to the wrongs we have committed by confessing to ourselves. It is our responsibility to speak to the injured party. Only then can the reconciliation process commence.

## 4. Reconciliation

The Mishnah teaches, “For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being to another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.” Our *teshuva* is not complete unless we confront the ones we have wronged and asked for their forgiveness.

## 5. Resolution

Maimonides teaches that we have done *teshuva* when we can return to the place where we have transgressed, and can reject the behavior that we may have embraced willingly in the past.

*Teshuva* is not simple but these 5 steps are in place to help make it a bit easier. *Teshuva* is essential to self-care. Let us do *teshuva* by returning to the selves we hoped we could be, to the selves not yet realized and to the selves we hope to become. We can only begin to care about others when we start to care about ourselves.

## Prayer

If doing *teshuva* is hard, prayer is even harder. But what if I told you that I have the secret to living a long and healthy life? What if I told you that in order to live a long and healthy life, all we need is a little faith.

According to a number of studies over the years, the devout in our midst tend to be healthier though we do not know exactly why this is. Some believe that healthy people join religious institutions and lead a more wholesome lifestyle. “Churches, synagogues and mosques may help people take better care of themselves. The quiet meditation and incantations of praying, or the comfort of being prayed for, appears to lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, slow the heart rate and have other potentially beneficial effects.”<sup>4</sup> “A study using data from the Women's Health Initiative found that women aged 50 and up were 20% less likely to die in any given year if they attended religious services weekly.” A different study concluded that “...weekly attendance at religious services is associated with 2 to 3 additional years of life.”<sup>5</sup> So there you have it, if you want to live a healthy life come to Hillel. Truth be told, no one is quite sure if it is prayer that helps the people live longer or just being in a social situation. Regardless the observation is real. Let us resolve to be more social in the year to come and for a few extra points why not to it at Hillel. Socialization is a form of self care that almost anyone can get behind.

## Acts of Righteousness

The final item that can avert judgments sever decree is *tzedakah* or Acts of Righteousness. The word *tzedakah* is usually translated as charity but that is really incorrect. The Hebrew word for charity is *chessed* which implies that the recipient has no right to the gift

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/23/AR2006032302177.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.verywell.com/religion-improves-health-2224007>

and that the donor is under no obligation to give it. The donor gives it gratuitously, from the goodness of his heart. Thus the act of charity is a virtue rather than an obligation. *Tzedakah*, on the other hand, means righteousness or justice. Here the implication is that the donor gives because it is his obligation.

Yes I realize that it is harder to be charitable with money while you are in college. Hopefully monetary stability will help alleviate that problem in time, but I have no excuse not to perform Acts of Righteousness and neither do you. This is something we must start doing not just because we are Jews but because we are human beings.

Let's try to actualize Maimonides' highest form of *tzedakah* by trying to sustain a person before she becomes impoverished. If we are financially stable enough we should offer a substantial gift in a dignified manner, or by extending a suitable loan. If money is tight, as it is for many of us, we can help him to find employment or establish himself in business so as to make it unnecessary for him to become dependent on others. We are all capable of doing this; we just need to put our mind to it.

Rabbi Richard Hirsch, Honorary Life President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, almost prophetically addressed our present state of affairs when he said, "The question of the High Holy Days is not why things happen but rather how will we respond to what happens...Repentance, prayer and charity do not avert evil decrees, but they can mitigate the severity of the bad things that happen in life by giving us a place in which to feel supported, cared for and valued..."<sup>6</sup> Let us heed the words of Rabbi Hirsch and look for people who share our dreams, hear our challenges, and respond to our calls when we are in need. In doing so we take the first steps in working toward repairing our broken souls.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/11556/jews-today-must-reinterpret-ancient-holy-day-messages/>

So let us begin self-care with humility. According to Rabbi Harold Kushner, “Humility is the realization that not everything that happens in life is about you. Humility means recognizing that you are not God and that it is not your job or responsibility to run the world.”<sup>7</sup> A Christian Internet commentator builds on this idea. He says, “If we take the ‘Don your own mask first’ metaphor too far, we create an intense focus on ourselves. But we don’t need more self-focus. We need more self-forgetfulness. The purpose of the mask metaphor is to equip us to care for others.”<sup>8</sup> Self-care is about learning when to give to others and learning when to give to ourselves.

So here is an idea for both you and me as we pray for our names to be sealed *b’sefer ha-chayim*, in the Book of Life. Let us look to Psalm 121 to guide our self-care or the year 5777. Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman teaches that when we “lift our eyes to the mountains” may we be ready to nourish our spirits. Let us find something that brings us spiritual renewal and use that to guide our own self-care. We must praise the “maker of heaven and earth” by delighting in His creation. We must take time to be with the people we care about and love. While it is God who “neither slumbers nor sleeps” it is incumbent upon us to take the time to renew our body. We must stop talking about the importance of making healthy life choices; we must actually do them. If God “guards us from all harm” then it is our job to play and have fun. We must find the time to do the things that make us smile and program those activities into our busy schedule. Finally, since God “guards our going and coming” let’s resolve to find the time to get away. According to most studies we need to strive for at least two consecutive weeks of vacation every year, in addition to mini-vacations. In just a few short hours each of you has the opportunity to practice self-care at our Alternative Yom Kippur Experience with Lindsay. This meditative experience

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<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, *Overcoming Life’s Disappointments*, p. 120

<sup>8</sup> <http://beliefsoftheheart.com/2014/08/26/should-we-put-on-our-own-masks-before-assisting-others/>

will focus on your body and its connection to the themes of Yom Kippur. I strongly urge you to join Lindsay at 4:00 pm.

Let us take the advice of Professor Randy Pausch, who after being diagnosed with a terminal illness wrote *The Last Lecture*. His book illustrates how important it is to value life even when in dire straits. Pausch writes, “When Jai and I went on our honeymoon, we wanted to be left alone. My boss, however, felt I needed to provide a way for people to contact me. So I came up with the perfect phone message: ‘Hi, this is Randy. I waited until I was thirty-nine to get married, so my wife and I are going away for a month. I hope you don’t have a problem with that, but my boss does. Apparently, I have to be reachable.’ I then gave the names of Jai’s parents and the city where they live. ‘If you call directory assistance, you can get their number. And then, if you can convince my new in-laws that your emergency merits interrupting their only daughter’s honeymoon, they have our number.’ We didn’t get any calls.”<sup>9</sup>

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have started our descent into real life. In preparation for landing, please make sure your seatbacks and tray tables are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on baggage is stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead bins. Let us pledge to continue what we began ten days ago so that over the next year our *teshuva*, *tefilah* and *tzedakah* will come a bit easier. Please check around your seat for any personal items you may have brought onboard and use caution when opening the overhead bins, as your baggage [and thoughts] may have shifted during the flight." If we return to our innermost self through *teshuvah*, if we link ourselves to God through *tefilah* and if we commit to doing Acts of Righteousness through *tzedakah* then self-care is within our grasps. On behalf of the flight crew, I want to welcome you to real life.

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<sup>9</sup> Randy Pausch, *The Last Lecture* (New York, 2008), pp.110-11.