

## Yom Kippur 5767

### Taking Care of Ourselves: Our Obligation to God

Rabbi Francine Roston, Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ

Over the past year I have been with many of you at critical points in the life cycle of your family. We have been blessed to celebrate the births of children and grandchildren, Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, graduations from religious school, high school and college, and we have celebrated many weddings. I have also been with families in the hospital, the nursing home, the rehabilitation center, by their bedside, on the phone. Every once in a while I find that I have failed one of you by not being there and, on this day of atonement I tell you, as I have tried in person, that I am truly sorry. I have done my best when people have notified me to be there for spiritual support. Between myself and the Cantor, our Caring Committee and our congregational nurse Karen Frank, we work hard to meet the pastoral needs of this sacred congregation.

No one wants to be alone when they are ill and suffering. No one wants to feel abandoned by loved ones, by the community, or by God. So, please call us or call someone who will call us, so that we can offer comfort and help others to offer comfort.

The Psalmist expresses our fear of abandonment in the High Holy Day liturgy, in the Shma Koleinu section, we chant *al tashlikhenu l'ait ziknah kichlote kochenu al ta'azvenu. ...Do not cast me away when I am old: do not forsake me when my strength is gone. ...When I am sick or suffering in my soul, do not abandon me...When I begin to question my value, my contribution, my abilities...do not forsake me, affirm my value, restore my dignity, show me the respect I seek and deserve as a creature of God...*

As we reflect on the lives we have shared with the loved ones we mourn today, I ask you to ask yourselves...have you treated yourself, your body and your spirit, in the way that you hope you will be treated by others....

My greatest frustration comes when I hear that the person who is suffering before me neglected his health because he didn't want to go to the doctor/didn't want to trouble anyone....or she neglected her health because she was too busy taking care of her family and her responsibilities at work....or he neglected his health because he didn't want to admit that it was something because then he would have to **do** something—undergo a test, take a medication, see a doctor and admit that his body was failing him. We somehow think we are supposed to be the energizer bunnies and just keep going and going and going. It doesn't say that anywhere in OUR instruction manual. In fact it says the opposite. We are given a life and as we age, our body wears down...

In Kohelet/The Book of Ecclesiastes (12:1-8) we read a view of aging that is pessimistic or realistic (take your pick):

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them": before the sun and*

*the light and the moon and stars grow dark and the clouds return after the rain: when the keepers of the house tremble and strong men stoop... when men rise up at the sound of birds but all their songs grow faint: when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets: when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him – before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken: before the pitcher is shattered at the spring or the wheel broken at the well and the dust returns to the ground from which it came and the spirit returns to G-d who gave it. Meaningless, meaningless says the Teacher, everything is meaningless.*

I have been living this sermon for years. I often walk around in physical pain. I understand—really, I do. I talk myself out of it—there are no physical signs. No one can see it. I can't see it. Maybe it's not really happening. But then, every time I touch the step wrong, or twist a jar, or lift a book...that twinge of pain comes and shouts its wake up call. And what do I do? I say to myself...it will go away. Maybe if I decide I'm OK, I will be OK....maybe if no one else knows, it's not real...I'm young. I'm getting old. I'm in shape. I'm out of shape.

Where ever I am. Where ever YOU are. What unites us is that we are human. And according to Jewish tradition, we are given these physical/limited/aging bodies as a loan from God...in which to store our soul...until it is time for God to call back our soul and then we must return our body to the earth from where it came...long, long ago.

Really, we are all aging. From the moment we are born, we are aging. We are living and growing and moving closer to the day of our death. We could live with greater freedom and purpose if we would accept aging, rather than deny it; accept our limits, rather than ignore them.

And, it's not enough to just go along for the ride, using and neglecting our bodies. We are not allowed to just use them and abuse them. Not only will we suffer for the mistreatment to our bodies but we will suffer the sin of neglecting God's command to take care of our bodies because only with healthy bodies can we serve God. Rabbi Elliot Dorff in his book on Medical Ethics called Matters of Life and Death teaches this: "Proper hygiene, diet, exercise, and sleep are not just a recipe for feeling good and living a long life but rather legal obligations to God, for our bodies belong to God and we thus have a fiduciary responsibility to care for them." So, the following story was told about Hillel, one of the most important Jewish leaders of the first century BCE.

*Once when he had finished a lesson with his students, he accompanied them partway home.*

*'Master,' they asked, 'where are you going?'*

*'To perform a religious duty,' he answered.*

*'What duty is that?'*

*'To bathe in the bathhouse.'*

*'Is that a religious duty?' they asked.*

*'If somebody is appointed to scrape and clean the statues of the king that stand in the theaters and circuses, is paid for the work, and even associates with the nobility,' he answered, 'how much more should I, who am created in the image and likeness of God, take care of my body!'" --(Leviticus Rabbah, Chapter 34, section 3)*

Maimonides, who was both a rabbi and a physician in the Middle Ages, devoted several chapters of his code of Jewish law to the obligations of caring for our bodies. He even goes so far as to say, we do not just care for our body in order to better perform other mitzvot. We care for our body because that act, in and of itself, is a positive, legal commandment.

*He who regulates his life in accordance with the laws of medicine with the sole motive of maintaining a sound and vigorous physique and begetting children to do his work and labor for his benefit is not following the right course. A man should aim to maintain physical health and vigor in order that his soul may be upright, in a condition to know God...Whoever throughout his life follows this course will be continually serving God, even while engaged in business...because his purpose in all that he does will be to satisfy his needs so as to have a sound body with which to serve God. Even when he sleeps and seeks repose to calm his mind and rest his body so as not to fall sick and be incapacitated from serving God, his sleep is service of the Almighty. (Mishneh Torah, Deut 3:3)*

Taking a nap could be a religious ritual, a mitzvah in serving God!! Through physical health, we find spiritual health. Taking care of our bodies is our duty. And if our bodies give out, are our lives purposeless? If we are incapacitated, are we unable to serve God....Absolutely not.

I have come to learn by being with many of our congregants—many of our extended family—that we serve God with the intention with which we live our lives, no matter what the physical outcome. The important part is the intention in our hearts.

We take care of our bodies, so that we can take care of our souls. We take care of our bodies so that we can live lives of purpose, filled with sacred acts. And when our bodies give way, we live our life the best we can---constantly fighting to live and breathe and praise God through that fight, praise God with a smile/a grimace/ a shirk of the shoulder/ a squeeze of the hand.

*We read in the Torah only a few weeks ago, from the Book of Deuteronomy:  
See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity. For I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, to walk in God's ways and to keep God's commandments...*

*Choose life...For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure...  
(Deut 30:15-16;19,20)*

*Baharta ba-hayyim....Choose life...not death...Choose healthy habits....not destructive habits...Choose to live...with whatever resources are available to you...but choose to live...*

Morrie Schwartz said it best through his student and scribe Mitch Albom, from the book "Tuesdays with Morrie"

*All this emphasis on youth—I don't buy it. I know what a misery being young can be; so don't tell me it's so great. Who wants to live every day when...people are manipulating you, telling you to buy this perfume and you'll be beautiful, this pair of jeans and you'll be sexy—and you believe them...'*

*Mitch asks him, 'Weren't you ever afraid to grow old?'*

*'Mitch, I embrace aging...It's very simple. As you grow, you learn more...If you stayed at 22, you'd always be as ignorant as you were at 22. Aging is not decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also the positive that you understand you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it. The issue is to accept who you are and revel in that...'*

The Torah teaches us that our reward for following God's laws, for respecting our mother and father, for treating animals with kindness, for living righteous lives...our reward is long life. We know that many times such long life does not seem to be a blessing. We just need to look harder. We need to search within ourselves, within our loved ones, search God's ways...to find the blessings. They ARE there. Even in their dying moments, our loved ones communicate blessings. They somehow find the strength to smile, to command, to squeeze our hand...and to release their spirits.

And, we who are left on earth...We must do what we can to make sure that the life we are given we care for and make a blessing so that we can best serve God.

Our loved ones who have died and gone before us have left us with many great lessons. Some we are to learn from and emulate and others we are to learn from and do better...We must treat our bodies well. We must Exercise, visit the doctor, and listen to our aches and pains. We must Study God's laws so that we can live good lives, filled with purpose and meaning and blessings. And we must choose life in the face of death. We must choose life in the face of illness, struggle and suffering. We must choose life in tribute to those we remember this Yom Kippur.