

Life, Death, Rebirth: The Flourishing of Hope

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This is real and you are *completely* unprepared.

Is it just me, or is this the best book title ever? *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, by Rabbi Alan Lew, is required reading for anyone who wants to deepen their spiritual experience of the High Holy Days.

In this book, Lew shares a poignant description of a trip into the deep wilderness of the Pacific Northwest:

“We arrived during the end of the life cycle of the chum salmon. The salmon rage up the wild rivers to spawn, but the moment they do, they begin to lose their life force. They begin to die. They rage, they spawn, their life force dims, and they die. You can see this happening before your eyes. Their scales begin to blacken and fall off. Their jaws become locked in a kind of permanent rage. And you can see it because something else happens in this final stage of their lives which is really quite wonderful. They begin to jump out of the water, very high and very often. Why? Some say it’s a vestigial instinct...and some say they leap for joy, either the pure joy of the leap itself, or to celebrate that their lives have successfully run their course. They have spawned. They have kept the life cycle going.”

Lew continues:

“This is a picture of the soul’s journey to express itself, to spawn, to create what it was put on this earth to create, and then to make a leap of great joy.”

And isn’t that the goal of our lives? To let our salmon souls rage up the river of life, shape the next generation, and leap into the unknown darkness afterward.

Each year we’re reminded that on Yom Kippur we rehearse our deaths. We empty the *aron hakodesh* and it transforms into an *aron*, the sacred ark becomes a plain casket. We hear the plaintive melody of Kol Nidre, rising and falling like salmon jumping out a dark river. Its music enters our body, and we hear the pain of loss, the pain of impermanence, the pain of our finitude. Yom Kippur reminds us of a truth we prefer to ignore in the quotidian moments of our lives—You will die. I will die. We will *all* die.

It sounds so heady, so depressing. Yet, I believe that Yom Kippur has been misunderstood. Like the salmon, like our souls, Yom Kippur reminds us that in this moment, we do the work to let the last year die, so we can joyously leap into the new year reborn. If the message of this day

were only that we would die, then it *would* be depressing. But it's not. Our mortality may signify the end of our egos; but so much lives on after us.

Yom Kippur is a holy day of hope. A holy day of rebirth.

Life. Death. Rebirth.

That's nature's way. That's God's way. That's our goal today.

Let's get on the right path today so we can be reborn before we die.

I know, I *know*, some of you are wondering why am I stepping down as Senior Rabbi and why now? A few brave friends have even shared with me some of the theories pulsing through the Beth Am grapevine, and may I just congratulate some of you on your incredible storytelling skills?

Why am I leaving? Why now? Life. Death. Rebirth.

The last time I preached on Kol Nidre was the year we returned to the sanctuary after Covid. I remember it keenly because my father, of blessed memory, had died just a week or so before. That evening, I shared with you my process for articulating a purpose statement for my rabbinate here at Temple Beth Am. Today, our vision, mission, and values are embedded in our congregation. Our team and lay leadership are strong. Our finances are in the black. As I said in my congregational letter last month, I believe I've fulfilled my purpose here at Beth Am.

Despite the unprecedented turbulence of the last twelve years, together we create powerful Jewish experiences that inspire lives and heal the world. I am secure in knowing that the sacred work of our congregation will continue to enrich the Jewish community in Seattle.

Several years ago, Rabbi Eric Yoffie stepped down as the CEO of the Union for Reform Judaism. His explanation for why he was stepping down was simple: "While I don't know about life after death, I do believe in life before death." For some reason his words rang a gong in my brain. I was serving my previous congregation in New Jersey, and it was an honor to serve them. It has been an honor to serve you. It was an honor to serve congregations in Connecticut and Manhattan. And...my intention was *never* to be a congregational rabbi. People plan and God laughs God's *tuches* off. There's still much I want to accomplish before I retire and so as I enter a new stage of life, my rabbinic purpose is shifting.

Please know this: I am leaving with a leap of joy, like the salmon. We'll each—this congregation and me—grow and change in unexpected ways, and we'll always be connected by the years

we've shared together. Rabbis come and go. Congregations wax and wane. The wisdom of our ancestors, the wisdom of Judaism, is the river from which we arise and into which we return.

Yom Kippur reminds us that we're part of the great natural cycles of life. Yom Kippur reminds us that we can summon the strength to jump into the unknown. Yom Kippur reminds us that we can conjure the ability to embrace hope for the future.

Life. Death. Rebirth.

As I've shared in different venues, we've shaped Temple Beth Am to respond to the VUCA world of the past twelve years. VUCA, a phrase popularized by futurists, describes a world that's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. The litany of woe is endless: climate disasters, weakening democracies, escalating authoritarianism, virulent antisemitism, endless and senseless wars, AI technologies outpacing humans, a coarsening of civic culture, a breakdown in common decency.

We doomscroll and struggle to find coherence and meaning in this world around us. In fact, things have gotten so bad that futurists have come up with yet another acronym to respond to the never-ending chaos and disruption—BANI. B. A. N. I. We're brittle and anxious; our world is nonlinear and incomprehensible. It's enough to make you want to rend your garments and don ash-cloth. Some of us are caught in the stranglehold of fear; some are beset with anxiety; some are weighed down by depression; some escape into the cave of indifference. It's hard to be our best selves under these circumstances.

Yom Kippur is our antidote to all of this. Today, we disengage from the world and rehearse our deaths. We fast, we don't bathe; we wear shrouds of white. We practice being corpses. Yom Kippur is designed to desensitize us to the reality of our deaths. Yom Kippur helps us get more comfortable with the *fact* of our deaths to motivate us to *live*. After all, if we've succumbed to despair or apathy or stagnation, isn't that already a living death? Why, then, should we fear our actual death?

There's a beautiful story from the Talmud that speaks of our fear of death. Rav Nachman was dying, and his student Rava sat at his bedside. "Please tell the angel of death not to torment me," the teacher beseeched his student. "I will," said Rava, "and please promise me that you will show yourself to me in a dream after you die."

After he died, Rav Nachman came to Rava in a dream. Rava asked him, "My teacher, did you suffer much when you died."

Rav Nachman replied: "As little as when you remove a hair from milk. And yet, if God were to say: 'Go back again to the world as you were,' I would not; because the fear of death is so great."

Yom Kippur teaches us to be open to our deaths so we can be open to our lives. Time is ever flowing. One moment falls away; a new one arises. In this cosmic rhythm, our consciousness also rises and falls and continually evolves. At the heart of this day of profound seriousness, this day of days, is unfettered joy for being human. Despite our mortality, or maybe because of it, Yom Kippur is a day of magnificent, audacious, sacred hope.

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Early in my rabbinical training, I was in a class taught by a hospital chaplain, Rabbi Zahara Davidowitz-Farkas. The topic was pastoral counseling for a patient who is dying. The anxiety in the room was palpable. We students, most of us quite young, couldn't imagine what words of comfort we might offer. Our teacher gazed intently at us, and she said in a soft voice: "When you are at the bedside of a person who is dying, you have entered their Holy of Holies. It's the most sacred space you can be in, and you must honor that space. You must remember that in every human life, even at the moment of death, there's *always* an opportunity for hope. Not necessarily the hope of recovery, but the hope of peace, the hope of eternity."

I've never forgotten that lesson. Hope is not a Pollyanna belief that, magically, all will somehow end well. Hope is the searingly honest recognition of what is wrong with the world. Hope fosters within us the courage and energy to endure hardship. Hope emboldens us, when possible, to make the world a more just, more compassionate place.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, famously wrote: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the people who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They...offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance, to choose one's own way."

Frankl provides us with a blueprint for renewing hope in our darkest hour. Let's not fool ourselves; human beings are *never* in full control of our lives. We are always vulnerable to external forces that may lead to suffering. And yet, our minds are capacious enough to shift attitude; our souls are spacious enough to give birth to a new reality. Yom Kippur reminds us that each crisis launches an opportunity to shape our world, our relationships, and ourselves for the better.

We can change what is, to what ought to be.

One moment falls away; another arises; and hope flourishes in the gap between.

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We have the gift of a full day to nurture our salmon souls so that together we'll joyously leap into the new year. For a new year to arise, the old one must fade. That's the truth of the world we've been born into, and there's nothing we can do about it.

The most hopeful book I've read in the last year is *The Beginning Comes after The End*, by Rebecca Solnit. Solnit notes how many people feel hopeless about the state of the world. She urges us to take a broader view. "It's easier to see the old world dying than to see a new world being born. But beginnings are what comes after endings."

For example, she shares the story of the Klamath River in Southern Oregon. For thousands of years, the river and the land around it were stewarded by the local Karuk, Yurok, Hupa, and Shasta tribes. Settlers seized the land from the indigenous residents, and in the early 20th century, the upper basin was drained, and four dams were built to block the flow of water.

For more than a century, the river's chinook salmon were prevented from completing their journeys to their ancient spawning grounds upriver. The local tribes united with one another, along with their supporters, to protect the diminishing salmon. They campaigned to dismantle the dams and let the river run free. Their effort took decades but in autumn of 2024 the dams were finally destroyed.

For the activists, this was a moment of victory and a moment of anxiety. Would the stagnant river be restored as a healthy ecosystem? Would the salmon replenish itself by swimming upstream? The dam was opened, the waters burst forth, and immediately, the first salmon in more than a century swam up the Klamath's curving and winding route.

"It's amazing," said Ron Reed, a fisherman from the Karuk tribe. "That's what we've prayed for."

The beginning comes after the end.

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The salmon do not know what awaits beyond the bend in the river. They swim anyway.

That's our task tonight.

None of us knows what this year will bring. None of us knows what changes await this congregation, our families, our country, or our world. We do know that change will come. We know that endings will come. And we know that, by the grace of God, beginnings will emerge as well.

So, let's not cling too tightly to what has been. Let's honor it, bless it, learn from it, and release it. Let's have the courage to leap.

May this sacred day help us set down what no longer serves us. May it help us return to the people we're meant to be. May it renew within us the stubborn, holy hope that has sustained the Jewish people through every season of change.

In 5787, let's cherish what has been and embrace what is arising, and nurture the hope that flourishes in between.

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G'mar chatimah tovah.

Sources:

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