

**Rabbi Jeremy Barras
Temple Beth El
Kol Nidre 5769**

Our “Last Lectures”

Last fall at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, a lecture series was convened by a group of professors. The task of each professor was to address students on the thoughts they would like to convey if that lecture was the last lecture they would ever deliver. For most of the teachers it was an interesting and fun exercise, and an opportunity for them to share the most prized teachings they had produced throughout their careers. But for one teacher, this was not merely a hypothetical exercise. For Randy Pausch, who had recently been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, this truly was his last lecture. And the lessons he imparted, which have become immortalized thanks to the internet, have left an indelible mark on many of the people who heard them. Professor Pausch knew that the 400 students in attendance were aware of his dire medical condition, so he began his remarks by saying, “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, we can only change how we play the hand. If I don’t seem as morose as you think I should be, I’m sorry to disappoint you...I’m dying and I’m having fun because there is no other good way to play the game.”

Randy Pausch was an inspiring figure not only because he faced terminal illness with great courage, but because he realized that his days were finite and he was committed to making the most of the days that he had left.

No matter what age we are, our lifetime on this earth is finite. We have a certain amount of time to pursue those tasks that we would like to accomplish, and no more. In the High Holy Day liturgy we are instructed to repent one day before we die, and as our ancient sages suggest, since we do not know which day will be our last on this earth, we need to repent every single day. Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin, a well-known Reform rabbi taught us to invert the rabbinic saying “repent one day before you die,” into the potentially more fulfilling dictum, “live fully and properly as if tomorrow were to be your last day.” Professor Pausch and Rabbi Zeldin both acquired through their life experiences a profound comprehension of the human lifespan. They realized how one can make life meaningful, and it is those sentiments that I would like to speak about on this Kol Nidre.

A particularly intriguing character from our Torah whose narrative echoes the themes Professor Pausch dealt with is Joseph from the book of Genesis. We can surely imagine the trauma Joseph incurred from his brothers’ decision to sell him into slavery. I would imagine that most of the people sold into slavery in Egypt in biblical times never regained their freedom. They were probably doomed to a life of misery and hardship with no hope of ever regaining their right to self-determination. The brothers logically thought that Joseph would never be seen or heard from again – as if to them, he was dead.

But Joseph’s reaction to being sold into slavery is curious – eerily similar to Dr. Pausch’s optimism in the face of incurable cancer. What does Joseph say when his new jailers grasp hold of him and place him in shackles? Does he lament his misfortune like Job? Does he bargain with the Almighty like Abraham and Moses? No. In fact he does not say anything – the Torah records no reaction, no protest, no utterance of any sort.

Joseph seems to accept his plight as if he knows something about his future that no one else could possibly imagine.

We know ultimately that Joseph does regain his freedom when he wins the favor of the Pharaoh and is appointed second in command over all of Egypt. But his true response to his brothers is not known until that fateful moment of his reunion with them in Egypt many years later. We do not learn of it until Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and says to them, “It is me, your brother Joseph who you sold into Egypt.” In their stunned silence, his first words to them are, “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that G-d sent me ahead of you.”

Joseph was a prophet and the Torah indicates that he knew that his slavery would ultimately be for the good, that it would be a benefit for humankind and for the Jewish people. True he suffered substantially and had to deal with the harsh reality of bondage, but he made a grand effort to deal with the cards he was dealt. Something bad happened to him, but he did not let that deter him from making the most out of his situation. The book of Genesis does not record his frustration or negativity, or any concession towards defeat. Instead, it teaches of his optimism, his ability to forgive and move on, and his efforts to make the most out of the grueling reality that was hoisted upon him.

None of us are prophets like Joseph – none of us can say for certain that the next day will be better than the last like he could. But we can say, like Joseph and Professor Pausch did, that we will make the most out of whatever hand we are dealt, whatever days remain, or whatever challenge confronts us. We can turn negativity on its head and search for the best in any situation, so that the finite days that each of us is allotted are filled with worthwhile experiences that are befitting of a properly contented lifetime.

I have spoken with many people who were nearing their final days in this world. I have been with many people on their deathbeds and chatted with them at length about the stories of their lives, their accomplishments, their regrets, their adventures and the legacy that they hope to leave for the next generations. And often what I learn is that their regrets stem not from what they have done, but what they never did; there is the person who had so many chances to visit Israel, but by the time they got around to it, they were too old to travel that far; there are the people who never spent enough time with children, and before they knew it, their kids were grown up and lived too far away to see very often; there is the person who always wanted to learn to read Hebrew or get through the Torah one time or figure out what exactly the Talmud is; and there is the person who always wanted to travel more or get a masters degree or discover a more fulfilling career. These regrets are sometimes the most painful, because we come to realize in our later years that we never made time for what we really wanted to do, and instead filled our days with pursuits that seemed important at the time, but in retrospect were insignificant and leave us unfulfilled.

In the Talmud there is a story about a king who invited his servants to a grand feast at his palace, but did not tell them the exact date of the party. The smart ones among his courtiers dressed in their finest clothes and prepared themselves by waiting outside the palace entrance. The foolish ones remained in their common clothes and continued to engage in their own pursuits, thinking they had plenty of time to prepare for the king's announcement. Suddenly, the king asked for all invitees to attend, but only the

appropriately attired guests were asked to sit, eat, drink and enjoy the hospitality of the king.

Just as this metaphor illustrates, our lives seem to be one long preparation for something we cannot comprehend. It is not a race to see who can amass the most money, or possessions, or even to see who can accomplish the most professionally. In my business, rabbis often judge their careers by how large their congregation was at the peak of their careers and how influential they had become in their communities and the Jewish world, as opposed to calculating how fulfilled they were personally through the work they had done serving the Jewish people. If we race through life pursuing ill-fated goals, then we open ourselves to a panorama of regret in our twilight years. We will realize that all the people we wanted to impress along life's path are gone, and we are left alone to consider our life's work. My grandfather used to teach his congregation that "our constitution guarantees us the right to the pursuit of happiness, but those people who spend their lives in the selfish pursuit of their own happiness are among the most unhappy people he's ever met."

Each day in our life matters. It is important how we spend those days not only because our actions influence the world we live in, but also because we are saddled with the responsibility of leaving a positive legacy for future generations. In our daily prayers we refer to G-d as the father of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah – three generations of mothers and fathers passing the wisdom of the Torah on to their children. We should not see ourselves as excused from that process. We too must pass on what we know. How we spend our days, the relationships we have with our children, the mitzvot we fulfill in this world, all reflect on the legacy that we will one

day leave when the conclusion of our finite period in this world arrives. Every day is an opportunity to contribute to that legacy, to insure that our being is substantive and worthy of admiration from the next generation.

I was very fortunate to have chosen a career that followed in the footsteps of my grandfather and great-grandfather, both of whom served the Jewish people as rabbis. My grandfather unfortunately died when I was 8 years old, so I never got to know him intellectually. I cannot tell you how much I wish I had the chance to tell him that I was going to be a rabbi too, just like him and his father. He never got to see me on the bimah, he was not even at my Bar Mitzvah, but perhaps he knew something that I never realized until recently – everything he had done in his life, even many years before I was born, was done to create a legacy for me, for all his offspring, so that we would learn from his example, from the way he filled his days, from the Torah he learned and taught throughout his life and career.

And now I realize that I am that beneficiary. Not only do I have all his old books, papers and sermons which help me a great deal, but I have his DNA – because of him my makeup is bent towards goodness and wisdom. His legacy helps makes my days more fulfilling.

The Midrash teaches that at the very end of Moses' life, G-d said to him, 'Behold your days are coming close to death. Do days [themselves] die? Rather, it comes to teach us that when righteous people die, it is only their days that die. Their righteousness lives on forever.' The legacies that we establish along life's path matters significantly – so much so that it becomes part of the eternal fabric of the universe. Those who come behind us will depend on our assistance to help make their lives meaningful. We have a

duty to provide them with a meaningful legacy – we have an obligation to put them in the best possible position to succeed in life both physically and spiritually. And if we fail to leave such a legacy for them, if we do not endow each day of our life with meaning to the best of our abilities, then we will not only fail ourselves, but we will let down those who come after us.

Speaking at the commencement of the senior class of Carnegie Mellon this past May, only two months before he passed away, Professor Pausch charged the graduating seniors to find their passion in life and to go after it. He told them he was told by the doctor's that he would not have even lasted this long, and that when he told that to a friend, he was asked if he felt that he had cheated the grim reaper. Professor Pausch responded that no one cheats the grim reaper, he comes for everyone. The question is, do we make the most out of our time between the time we are born and the time the grim reaper finally catches up with us?

On this Kol Nidre, as our repentance soars into the heavens and begs forgiveness for every opportunity missed over the past year, let us resolve ourselves to making this next year 5769, a year of meaning and fulfillment, a time of wisdom and achievement.

Kein Yehi Ratzon – May this be G-d's will.

Amen.

