

High Holiday Sermons 2010 Rabbi Steve Glazer, Congregation Beth Emeth

Rosh Hashanah Day 1

I begin my sermon this morning with a question: "How many of you are addicted to technology in general, and your smart-phones, Blackberries, or handheld devices in particular?" Please note that mine was the first hand up! My family and our staff will readily attest to the fact that I check my handheld ever two minutes or so. And, when some problem occurs and I am not receiving e-mails on my device, I very quickly grow impatient and am quite irritable until the problem has been solved. And, I'm willing to bet that I am not alone! Many of us have become addicted to the devices that help aid us in our increasingly busy lives.

An entire literature is evolving on how recent advances in technology impact our lives. To cite just two examples: 1) the best-seller by William Powers called "Hamlet's Blackberry." 2) the current front-page series in the New York times titled "your brain on computers." The book and the newspaper series are examples of early attempts to try to understand how heavy use of digital devices and other technology changes how we think and how we behave. It is fascinating to note that both include some sort of regular Shabbat-like experience during which individuals refrain from using their devices.

As we gather on this first day of Rosh Hashanah, we are actually engaged in just such an experience. Our Blackberries are at home (or, at least turned off – I hope!!) And our emotions are mixed. On the one hand, we are painfully aware of all the terrible things that might happen to ourselves, our families and to our world in the new year. And, at the same time, we cling to the dreams of what a blessed future might hold for us. Because of technology we instantly hear about war and terrorism and killing. But, as we begin the year 5771, we once again hope against hope that this will be the year when the human race finally gets it right and learns to live as God intended us to live.

And today, we turn to the machzor to learn what it would have us pray for, to bring peace and healing to a broken and bloodstained world.

People who are unfamiliar with Jewish prayer think we spend all these hours in synagogue asking God for things, because that is what they think prayer is. And they are not entirely comfortable with that because it has never worked for them before. When they were young, they might have prayed for a bicycle but they didn't get it. Or, if they did, they had reason to believe it wasn't God who gave it to them. When they were older, they might have prayed for a favorable report from their doctor. Sometimes they got it and sometimes they didn't, but they had trouble seeing where prayer affected the outcome.

But that's really not what Jewish prayer is about. Jewish prayer is not about asking. A non-Jewish friend once asked me "what do Jews pray for?" and I told her "Jews don't really pray for, so much as we pray to and with." most of the prayers we recite today aren't meant for God; they are meant for us. They come to remind us to be grateful. They come to teach us how to recognize God's presence in our lives. The prayer *Netaneh Tokef*, the emotional centerpiece of the high holiday liturgy, the one that speaks of it being "decided on Rosh Hashanah and confirmed on

Yom Kippur who shall live and who shall die," is not really a prayer to God to inscribe us in the book of life, though that is the metaphor used. It's really a lesson for us, to teach us that some of the things that will happen to us in the coming year are beyond our control, but that prayer, charity and a change of values can make those bad things hurt less. Jewish prayer is studying, pausing in our service to hear words of torah. And Jewish prayer is congregating, coming together to rediscover the great truth that the same words come out different when you say them together with others in the setting of a congregation.

But there is one point in the service where we do ask for something, where we do ask God to make things different in the new year. And it's not for ourselves. We ask God to make the world different in three ways. It comes in the middle of the amidah, the place where prayers of petition are traditionally inserted on weekdays. It comes in the form of a three -part prayer, each part beginning with the word, "uv'chen." Listen closely to what we ask for: how would we like the world to be different next year from the kind of world it was in the year just ended?

Our first request: "*Uv'chen ten pach'decha al kol ma'asecha v'yirat cha al kol mah she-baratta.* May all of God's creatures come to know the fear of God." Now you have to understand that, in the machzor, the phrase "the fear of God" has nothing to do with being afraid. It doesn't refer to fear of being punished or fear of going to hell when you die. "the fear of God" means a sense of morality, an awareness that certain things are wrong and should not be done. If we could change one thing about the world for this coming year, that would be it - that every human being come to recognize that certain things are wrong and should not be done: that hurting people is wrong; that cheating people is wrong; that your sense of grievance against society for the way your life turned out does not give you license to strike out in blind rage against that society. Some things are simply wrong, not just illegal, not just a matter of "what kind of world would it be if everybody did that?", but wrong. Why is that so hard to understand?

One reason is that popular culture, pop psychology, movies, etc. Have taught us that feelings are more important than anything else. Feelings are self-justifying. "why did you do it?" "because I was angry." and that's meant, not as an explanation but as a justification. The psychological insight that people are not responsible for their feelings and should not feel guilty for their thoughts has somehow been distorted into the notion that people are not responsible for what they do based on those feelings.

Sometimes a person with a conscience will say "I'm not happy doing this but it will lead to a greater good, so I'll give myself permission," which is why the word "rationalize" exists in the English language. "rationalize" means persuading yourself that something is all right when you really know that it isn't. So you get politicians lying to get what they want. And you get church leaders covering up serious crimes to protect the institution rather than to protect its most vulnerable members.

Would you like to be able to get on an airplane this coming year without having to worry that something might happen, without having to remove your wallet, your shoes, your belt buckle to prove you're not a terrorist? Would you like to pick up your morning paper and not be shocked or dismayed by what you read? Would you like to spend less of your money on security systems, burglar alarms? Would you like to get away from all that? This would be the place to start, our first wish for the new year: may all people come to understand that some things, no matter how tempting or emotionally satisfying they may be, are wrong and should not be done.

We turn now to the second of our three-part petition: “*Uv'chen ten kavod l'amecha, simcha l'artzecha v'sasson l'irecha*. May God grant honor to his people, happiness to his land and joy to his city of Jerusalem.” Our second wish for the new year is that Israel be treated more fairly than it generally is. The way Israel is portrayed in the media is often outrageous, as are the policies of many European governments, and the utterly shameful behavior of the United Nations. The situation in the Middle East warrants a balanced approach, equal time for each side's point of view. One may consider all violence distasteful and unfortunate; but, at the same time, insist that there is a distinction between the violence of the bank robber and that of the bank guard in resisting him. There is a moral difference between killing a mass murderer who is resisting arrest, and killing two-dozen young people in a coffee house.

“*Uv'chen ten kavod l'amecha*. May your people be treated honorably in the coming year.” May the world come to see Israel as a heroic, beleaguered people yearning for peace, but compelled by its enemies to spend its resources on defense rather than on sustaining the poor, the immigrant, and the left-behind. And yet, despite all these impediments, as we'll be discussing tomorrow, Israel is a world leader in entrepreneurship, producing more start-up companies than many larger and more peaceful nations. Israel is certainly not a perfect nation (which one is?!), but it is wrong for the Jewish state, and the Jewish people, to continue to be victims of defamation. May the new year see that change!

There is one more section in the prayer we have been discussing, virtually the only petition in the entire High Holiday service. It reads:

“*Uv'chen tzaddikim yir'u v'yismachu v'hassidim y'ranenu*. In this coming year, may the righteous have reason to rejoice and the pious have cause for happiness.” Or, as I would paraphrase it, may this world become a world in which good people will feel at home, a world that will give them, and will give God, reasons to say "this is my kind of place."

I recently read the story of a teenage girl from western Massachusetts who was abducted and killed a number of years ago and whose remains were only recently found. Her family and friends gathered for a memorial service during which one of the speakers, Rabbi Harold Kushner, explored what her death might possibly teach us about the kind of world we live in. Speaking to her grieving family and friends, Kushner said: "on one side of the scale, we have one evil person who did this terrible thing. On the other side, we have the hundreds of people, friends, neighbors and total strangers, who volunteered for a search party, the thousands who wrote letters and included the family in their prayers, the many hundreds who turned out for this memorial service. One man devoted to cruelty and thousands dedicated to kindness. I can live in a world like that."

Insightful, comforting words! But I also have to acknowledge that all the kindness and all the comfort and all the prayers of those thousands of people never really balance out the terrible void left by that one person's cruelty. It helps, but it doesn't really make up for it. It won't ever really be the world we yearn for, it won't really ever be the world God yearns for, until the cruelty disappears entirely and the world becomes a world full of kind people. If that is really our wish, if that is really our prayer for the new year, maybe the place to start is to stop admiring toughness, to stop rewarding ruthlessness in business and in politics, and to educate for kindness as the chief currency of success.

Standing as we are at the intersection of hope and fear, buffeted on one side by predictions of

what might happen, graced on the other side by the machzor's vision of a possible world, we pray: we pray that God open the eyes of every living person to the truth that some things are wrong and should not be done.

We pray that God's promise to Abraham be fulfilled, that all nations of the world come to realize how much they are blessed by the children of Abraham, by the faith of Abraham, and by the land God promised to Abraham.

And finally, we pray that this coming year will give good people everywhere reasons to rejoice, that the world will echo with the laughter of children, the rejoicing of happy families and the benediction of the creator of the world who will look down on his creation, and in the words of the old Jewish lady speaking to God on Rosh Hashanah, "God, this year may you have nachas from your children."

Amen!

Rosh Hashanah Day 2

Today we are going to speak about Israel – but not in any of the ways you might expect! We are not going to discuss Middle East politics, either the just-resumed peace talks, or Israel’s relations with her neighbors or with the Palestinians. And we are not going to talk about the many internal problems facing Israel, such as the “who is a Jew” question or the religious/secular disputes. Instead, we are going to examine a fascinating phenomenon, the subject of a recent volume entitled “start-up nation.”

The book was written by Dan senor, a former government foreign policy official and current investment fund advisor, and Saul Singer, a former editorial page editor and current columnist for the Jerusalem post, who happen to be brothers-in-law. The volume asks, and attempts to answer, the following question: how is it that Israel – a country of only 7.1 million people, only 62 years old, surrounded by enemies, in a constant state of warfare since its founding, with no natural resources – produces more start-up companies than large, peaceful, and stable nations like Japan, China, India, Korea and Canada? In 2008, Israel attracted \$2 billion in venture capital – as much as the U.K., or Germany and France combined. At the start of 2009, some 63 Israeli companies were on the NASDAQ, more than any other country in the world except the U.S.! Israel is the world’s “techno-nation”! Did you know that? It’s both fascinating and remarkable!

Senor and singer use a combination of analyses and anecdotes to explain how Israel, as small and beleaguered as it is, contains the greatest concentration of innovative technology and entrepreneurship in the world today.

Prior to discussing several of the explanations the authors offer, I’d like to share with you just three of the many stories they cite:

1. A man named Shvat Shaked founded a cybersecurity firm with a buddy from his army unit and had the chutzpah to bet a top executive at pay-pal, the on-line commerce company owned by e-bay, that his several dozen engineers could beat their thousands in developing secure on-line software. Guess who won? Not long afterwards, pay-pal bought Shaked’s small company, fraud sciences – for \$169 million!!
2. Michael Laor, an Israeli-educated engineer working for Cisco, convinced the company to open a research center in Israel. This led to their buying nine other Israeli companies and investing over a billion dollars in the local economy.
3. Gavriel Iddan worked for a company that develops weapons for the Israel defense forces. He specialized in the electro-optical devices that allow missiles to “see” their targets, and he had the novel idea of adapting that technology to develop a camera within a pill that could transmit pictures from within the human body. Many people told him he was crazy. Nevertheless, he started a business around these “pillcams” and called it Givin Imaging. The company was founded in 1998, went public in 2001, and in 2007 sold over 700,000 units. So - who’s crazy??

When we turn to reasons for Israel’s technological “miracle,” it should surprise no one that senor and singer cite many. Today, I would also like to focus on just three: immigration, research and development, and the military.

1. As we all know, Israel is a nation of immigrants, established as not only a Jewish homeland, but a haven as well. Nine out of ten Israelis are either immigrants themselves or first-or second-generation descendants of immigrants. Israel is home to more than seventy different nationalities and cultures, the largest and latest influx being from the former Soviet Union. In fact, Israel may very well be the only country in the world that actively and aggressively seeks to increase immigration, via aliyah. And immigrants are, by definition, risk-takers! They are used to failing and then starting over. A nation of immigrants is a nation of entrepreneurs!
2. For decades, Israel has invested heavily in research and development, primarily to address military problems through technology – including voice recognition, communications, optics, hardware and software, and the like. This has aided immeasurably in helping to jump-start, train, and maintain a civilian high-tech sector.
3. Most of you know that Israel has compulsory military service, due to the ongoing existential threat to the state. Much has been written about how its military creates cohesion among young men and women from a multitude of cultural backgrounds, and is a major influence in the formation of an “Israeli culture.” But there has been little attention paid to the fact that the Israeli military also plays a central role in producing its unique entrepreneurial climate. How so?

Briefly, most countries’ militaries, including ours, operate according to a hierarchical disciplinary code, i.e., the higher your rank, the greater your authority. But not in Israel!! There, top high school students are recruited directly into elite military units, with a heavy emphasis on technology. There, younger officers, and enlisted personnel, are expected to improvise, even if that means breaking some rules. In the Israel defense forces, if you’re a junior officer, you call your superiors by their first names; and, if you see them doing something wrong, you open your mouth and speak up. Given the skills they gain – in leadership, teamwork, and mission-oriented tasks – plus the contact they make, when many young Israelis complete active duty, they are uniquely qualified to launch start-up companies.

In summarizing these, and the numerous other reasons senior and senior cite for Israel’s remarkable entrepreneurial success, we can speak of “the chutzpah thesis,” the belief that Israelis have an uncanny drive to reject conventional wisdom, overcome setbacks, and embrace adversity. You see “chutzpah” everywhere in Israel: in the way people get on buses, in the way university students speak to their professors, employees challenge their bosses, sergeants question their generals, and clerks second-guess government ministers. So – it’s not just their formal military training that makes Israelis outstanding entrepreneurs, it’s also the fact that they’ve been taught to argue, even with their generals. And it’s not just that Russian Jews were strong in math and science that made them excellent engineers – it’s also the inner strength gained from adversity.

Before concluding: one final anecdote, about Intel, Israel’s largest private-sector employer, which today exports almost \$2 billion annually. As many of you remember, during the Gulf War of 1991 Israel was under siege. Iraqi missiles rained down, and the government announced that all schools, businesses, etc. had to close down because it wanted people at home, off the streets, and ready to get to their sealed rooms and shelters. Despite this directive, Dov Frohman, head of Intel’s plant, made a unilateral decision to keep his plant open and functioning. Employees showed up in large numbers, after safely securing their families, and work continued unabated.

Intel's top executives in California couldn't believe it! Here, in his own words, is what Frohman said about why he made the decision to continue making chips while missiles were landing nearby:

“I kept thinking about the survival of Israel's still small high-tech economy. One key stumbling block to investment in Israel was the impression of instability in the region. If Intel couldn't operate in an emergency situation, then any confidence that multinationals, investors, or the markets had in Israel's stability would instantly crumble.” Thanks to people like Dov Frohman, the question of catastrophic risk for those looking to do business in Israel is virtually irrelevant!

I hope my comments today have whetted your appetites enough to want to learn more of this fascinating story of Israel as “the start-up nation,” the world's foremost “technology nation.” Of so, I am happy to tell you that both our Wednesday morning and Thursday evening adult courses this fall will be examining the book in depth. There we shall have opportunities to discuss and debate its contents. In addition, we are hopeful that co-author, Dan Senor, will join us at some future date to speak about his book. It is my hope that many of you will avail yourselves of one or more of these opportunities to continue exploring this most fascinating phenomenon.

Kol Nidre

For decades I have worn my watch on my left wrist and a bracelet on my right. I own several and switch them from time to time. Almost exactly one month ago, I embarked on what I call “my bracelet experiment.” I began wearing two rubber colored bracelets – many of you know the type – they’re supposed to increase cancer awareness, and different colors represent different kinds of cancer. As I mentioned, I wear two: one is lime green, representing lymphoma which Andrea, my wife, has, and the other is kelly green, representing kidney cancer. I am a kidney cancer survivor! The ‘experimental’ part of my wearing these bracelets is to see if, by serving as visual reminders, they make me focus more frequently on what is really important in life. So far – I believe the experiment is working. This evening, I’d like to discuss with you another ‘visual reminder,’ whose purpose is also to focus our attention on what really matters.

A number of years ago, a man named David Kendrick of Berkshire, New York received a patent for something he called a "life expectancy timepiece." The watch contains a tiny computer into which you feed your age, medical history, life-style, eating habits and exercise regimens. The watch then uses actuarial data to compute your life expectancy and begins counting to zero.

Imagine walking down the street and someone asks you the time. You glance at your watch and say: "oh, about 17 years, 110 days, 21 hours, 4 minutes and 42 seconds until I die." isn't that a lot more interesting than saying '3:45'? Being able to glance down and watch your life ticking away before your eyes, now that's "a visual reminder"!!!

Now, some of you may be thinking: "that's morbid - how utterly depressing!" on the contrary, I think that being reminded that your life is temporary is incredibly liberating!

Let me tell you five ways Mr. Kendrick's watch would affect my life.

First, it would shock me. "whoa! You mean I've only got this much time left?" knowing I'm going to die in 17 years, 110 days, 21 hours, 4 minutes and 42 seconds (41 seconds, 40 seconds, 39 seconds ...). In the face of death, life becomes awesomely simple: acts of love and kindness, justice, and compassion are what count rather than the acts of revenge and one-upmanship that occupy most of our lives most of the time. In the face of this awesome simplicity, I would love more and lie less.

Second, Mr. Kendrick's timepiece would focus my attention on doing rather than feeling. I spoke a bit about feelings on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Feelings are fleeting, uncontrollable and unstable. Anger, love, sadness, joy trip over each other as they flit into and out of consciousness. Seeing the transience of my life would make the transience of my feelings even clearer. When we try to lock certain feelings in and other feelings out we live in constant frustration. By focusing attention on doing rather than feeling, I can make my life constructive, productive, effortful. Effort often leads to success, and success often brings positive feelings. Waiting to feel before we do is waiting to fail. Doing alone brings success. The old adage: those who can do, do is backward. The truth is: those who can do, can.

Third, Mr. Kendrick's watch would focus my attention on the present. So much of our time is spent dwelling on the past or dreaming about the future. Both past and future are figments of the imagination, distracting us from now. All there is is now. Now is a gift. Why do you think it's called "present"?

This brings me to the fourth impact of this time piece: ordinariness.

I'm nothing special: just a temporary animation of cells. I am simply god's way of getting things done. Do you want to know why you were born? To pick up the trash, to do the laundry, to parent a child, to feed the hungry, to visit the sick, to care for an aged parent, to brush your teeth. You were born to do whatever life gives you to do right now.

The illusion of specialness is at the root of so many problems. As Hillel taught: "if I am not for myself who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now when?" taking care of me requires taking care of you. What is a person who is only for him to herself? An aging adolescent perpetually seeking the inner child.

Lastly, Mr. Kendrick's watch would help me relax. Rather than feeling I've got to cram my years with meaningful experiences, I would experience the years as they come. So many of us are convinced that the way our lives should have turned out is somehow other than the way they did turn out. Why? Why do we deserve other than what we go? Why think we deserve anything?

Here I've got 17 years, 21 hours, 4 minutes and 42 seconds to go and life is what it is for the moment. And if I don't like what I've got, I can do something to change it; do something other than whine and dream and dwell on why I deserve better. Most of us are unhappy that we didn't get what we imagine we "deserve." maybe we did. Scary thought, isn't it?

I think Mr. Kendrick's watch would be a life saver for me, an many others like me. Unfortunately, the watch is not yet on the market. Too bad. I'd buy one and wear it. And the next time someone asked me "what time is it?" I'd say

"Thanks!"

Yom Kippur

All of you are aware of the fact that Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, brings to a close the high holy day season with which the new year starts, ten days that ask us to look at ourselves, to look at our lives, and to look into our Jewish tradition to find and select the values that we want to guide our lives in the coming year.

Today I would like to do something which, at first, seems a bit strange. I want to go back to the opening moments of Rosh Hashanah, to the very first words of the first torah reading on the first day of a new year. As a number of you know, it is the story of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah after many years of longing. It begins *va'adonai pakad et sarah ka'asher amar*, which both our mahzor and the new one, Lev Shalem render "the Lord took note of Sarah as he had promised," and to her great joy, she gives birth to a child. Now "took note," as used here, conveys the idea of "remembering." Indeed, the sidebar in Lev Shalem informs us "remembrance is a mental act; the word used here, "*pakad*," refers to an act of remembrance that is realized in deed and not only in thought, and is therefore translated by the stronger expression, "took note of..." that's both interesting and insightful. But, that's not what the Hebrew verb *pakad* usually means. I looked it up in a biblical dictionary and found seven definitions. The word most often means "to punish." it can also mean "to command, to organize, to arrange, to appoint or designate." the dictionary lists only one instance where it may mean to remember, to take note, and it's the one we are discussing. Nowhere else in the bible does it mean that.

And then there is one other sense in which *pakad* is sometimes used. I don't think it's what the bible had in mind in the passage I quoted, but one of the wonderful things about biblical Hebrew, and one of the things that makes it so hard to appreciate in translation, is that the same word can mean several different things at the same time, and the poor translator has to settle on one and exclude the others.

One of the best-known chapters in the Mishnah, the founding document of rabbinic Judaism edited in the 2nd century, is called "*hamafkid*" and discusses questions of responsibility when someone gives something temporarily to another to look after.

Please note that the verb for giving someone something temporarily, *mafkid*, is related to the verb from the Rosh Hashanah torah reading, *pakad*. *Adonai pakad et sarah ka'asher amar*, God gave Sarah something precious but it wasn't hers to keep forever. It was her responsibility to take good care of it even though one day she would have to relinquish it.

Even if the liturgy of Yizkor on Yom Kippur didn't tell us to do it, we would come to shul on these high holy days haunted by memories of people who once shared these services with us and are no longer here to do so. The seats around us are full but we sit here thinking about the empty seats next to us and the people who used to sit in them. It's hard not to feel sad, not to feel somehow diminished, maybe even to feel bitter, to ask "why? Why couldn't they have remained in our lives longer?" I want to suggest to you that maybe the answer is hinted at in those first words of the torah for this season: God sent those people into our lives but they weren't ours to keep forever. They were ours to cherish, to enjoy, to learn from and to love, and one day to be parted from.

To love someone is to make yourself a hostage to fortune. It is to make yourself vulnerable to being hurt in so many ways: by that person's behavior, by that person's shortcomings, by that person's poor judgment, and ultimately by that person's leaving you, whether by choice or by circumstance. And maybe that is why, at this season which is so heavy with memories, which is so laden with prayers for a year of life, which reminds us (as if we needed to be reminded) of all the things that might happen to us and to the people around us in the coming year, - maybe that's why the rabbis ordained that we begin with those particular words of torah: *Adonai pakad et Sarah*, God gave Sarah a precious gift and as he did so, he warned her that it would not be hers forever. God said to her, "I have made your soul in such a way that you are capable of connecting with another person, with another soul, husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, even friends." and God goes on to say to Sarah and to every one of us: "when you have that in your life, cherish it because it is so special and cherish it because it won't last forever."

Vadonai pakad et Sarah, God gave Sarah something precious and told her not to waste any time, to love it promptly and unceasingly because it would not be hers forever.

It is not only death that separates us from the precious gifts that God has sent into our lives. Time can do it as well. Parents grow old and needy and forgetful, and can no longer be the forceful presence in our lives that they once were, and we feel that we have lost some thing. Friends grow distant with time. Children grow up and no longer greet us with hugs when we come home. I can imagine God saying to Sarah, "you've been praying for a child for all these years. Do you really know what you're letting yourself in for? You know the pain of being childless, and it is a very real pain. But you're about to find out how painful it can be to be a parent." God says to her, "let's make one thing clear at the outset. The child is yours to raise, he's yours to nurture, but he's not yours to keep forever."

I would remind you of those famous lines from Kahlil Gibran in *the prophet*:

"Your children are not your children;
They are the sons and daughters
Of life's longing for itself...

You may give them your love but not your
Thoughts, for they have their own thoughts...

You are the bows from which your children
As living arrows are sent forth."

Children grow up, children grow distant. Nature compels them to declare their independence from us, to prove that they have minds and lives of their own. And sometimes during those difficult years we may feel that we are losing them. That is when we have to remember God's words to Sarah: we can't lose them, any more than we permanently lose parents and other loved ones to death. We can't lose them first because they were ours to give life to and to raise but they were never ours to keep. And we can't lose them because the tie between a parent and a child is too intimate to be left behind entirely.

There are other gifts that God gives us, to cherish while we have them because they won't be ours forever. With every passing year, with every turn of the page of the calendar to a new year, our bodies and our minds grow older and at a certain point, you realize you can't do things you

used to be able to do. We can make jokes about senior moments, but it's just another instance of our using humor to pretend that something that makes us anxious doesn't make us anxious.

How do those of us on the downhill side of life respond to being a year older? We can lament, we can grieve for the loss of mental acuity and bodily vigor. We can be jealous of younger people who still have what we've begun to lose. Or we can bask in the glow of the memories of who we once were because those memories can't be taken away from us. Every passing year leaves us with more past, more memories than we had before. And we can take stock of what we have acquired to compensate for what we may have lost. If we could get over seeing life as something that gets used up year by year and learn to see life as the accumulation of wisdom, if we could remind ourselves that in today's world wisdom is more of an enduring gift than muscle power, then we will have less reason to fear growing old.

So we come to shul on Yom Kippur and we say to God, "why do you tease us like this, God? Why do you send these beautiful people into our lives and then take them away when we need them most? Why can't they last forever?" and God says, "I can't do that. I can't cure a sick person every time somebody prays for him. I can't postpone death indefinitely because someone is loved. If I did that, pretty soon there would be no room in the world for young families to have babies. That's why I tried to warn Abraham and Sarah that this precious gift I was giving them was theirs to love and to enjoy but not to keep forever. But if I can't give you the gift you keep asking for, the gift of eternity, I have two other gifts for you to make up for it. I've given you the gift of memory and the capacity for gratitude."

The 23rd psalm is perhaps the best known passage in the entire bible. Many of you know it by heart. We'll be reciting it in just a few minutes. I'd like you to think about it as a drama in three acts. In act one, the author's life is serene and placid, - still waters and green pastures. Then in act two, he finds himself in the valley of the shadow, his life disrupted by sorrow and loss. And it is there that he discovers what God is really about, not the God of happy endings but the God who takes you by the hand and leads you through the valley of the shadow so that you don't have to spend the rest of your life in darkness. Act three is a hymn of praise to the God whom the author has come to know and feel close to. The line "my cup runneth over," the line about how grateful he is for all the blessings in his life, comes *after* the part about being in the valley of the shadow of death. Under the immediate impact of what happened to him, he can only think about what he has lost. But given time and some perspective, he is able to focus on what he had and what in a sense he still has.

So here we are on a day when we bring so many poignant memories to shul with us, and we say to God, "why does it have to hurt so much?" and God answers "if you didn't have the memories, painful as they may be, you would have lost those people, you would have lost those good years, those transcendent moments forever. Then you would really have lost them."

Vadonai pakad et Sarah and the Lord said to Sarah "here is something precious, something beautiful to enrich and brighten and complicate your life and fill it with meaning. It's yours to cherish, it's yours to care for. It's just not yours forever, although once you have loved it, it will be yours forever. Do you still want it on those terms?"

The Lord gives but the Lord does not take away. He teaches us to fill the empty spaces in our lives with memories of what once we had and with gratitude for what we still have, and our cup runneth over.