

ONE MONTH TO LIVE SERMON
Yom Kippur 5770
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Darla Barton, who lives in Clinton, Oklahoma, had been married for ten years but had no children. When people at her bank job asked her, “How many kids do you have?” She answered, “I haven’t been blessed with any,” and they would change the subject. During a Sunday school class that she taught, a young boy whose parents were divorcing, declared, “God doesn’t answer prayers.” Darla replied, “He didn’t answer mine.” Darla’s second husband, George Barton, had studied alto sax in conservatory. He regretted the fact that he had dropped out and spent his life as a hospital maintenance worker. More than that, he regretted that he had neglected his grown children whom he had left behind in Tulsa. He had called them occasionally, left messages, but stopped trying after he received no answers. It had been two years since he had seen them.

Then Darla and George signed up for a weekly session at their church to discuss the book, *One Month to Live*. George came to a meeting about the “Someday syndrome,” the way people put off really important things. “This is your life, right here, right now,” read the passage. “Wherever you’re reading this page, feeling what you’re feeling, facing what you’re experiencing, *Someday is right now*.” Inspired but fearing rejection, George waited a week, then called his older daughter. This time, she called back and shortly thereafter, the Bartons spent the day with her and her two young children. The next day they visited George’s son and spent three hours talking with him. “So when are y’all coming back?” the son asked as they parted. A few days later, George’s son-in-law called to say that he wanted to add Darla’s name to the family tree. “Something shifted,” Darla said, “I have my kids now... I truly feel I have a family.”¹

The book that turned the Bartons’ life around was *One Month to Live*, written by Kerry and Chris Shook.

¹ *NY Times* article, by Samuel G. Freedman, “On Religion.”

Kerry Shook is co-founder and senior pastor of an evangelical mega-church near Houston.

What inspired Shook to write the book was an experience he had with a friend and longtime congregant who had prostate cancer.

The doctors gave the congregant 6 months to live.

"We'll pray for you," Shook told him.

"You don't need to pray for me," the congregant responded.

"I need to pray for you and the congregation.

I'm not distracted by life anymore.

I know exactly what I need to do."

Shook writes: "I've been privileged to spend time with many people as they face the imminent end of their lives on earth.

While all of them struggle through the stages of grief—

shock, denial, bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, acceptance—

most of them make radical changes as a result of their awareness

of their terminal condition. They take license to say what they really feel and do what they really want. They ask for forgiveness and forgive others.

They no longer think only of themselves but reach out to those they love and let them know how much they mean.

They take risks they would never have taken before and

allow themselves to lay worry aside, gratefully accepting each new day.

They seem to gain a new clarity on their priorities,

like their relationship with God and leaving legacies that will endure.

Over the years of watching others live out their last days," says Shook,

"I began to ask myself, Why can't all of us live more like we're dying?

Isn't that how we were meant to live in the first place?

To discover what we're made for and to utilize our unique gifts

in the limited amount of time we're given?"

So last year at a staff retreat, Shook tried a little experiment and

asked his team members this question:

"If you knew you had one month to live, how would you live differently?"

He gave everyone a journal and challenged them to live the next thirty days

as if they were their last, writing down what happened.

"The results were nothing less than life changing!" Shook explains.

"At the end of the thirty days, we all had a greater clarity of purpose and

a renewed passion for the things that really matter.

Many people did big, once-in-a-lifetime things,

like going on a dream vacation to Hawaii with their spouse,

finally getting serious about a healthy lifestyle and

losing twenty-five pounds, or reconciling a relationship with a parent

that had been neglected for years."

Yom Kippur is an appropriate time for us to contemplate our death as well.

While, as a rule, Judaism focuses on life,
the one exception is Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is called a "rehearsal for death."

We fast from food, drink, sex, washing, and wearing leather,
as a way to detach ourselves from our physical bodies.

It is even the custom to wear the kittel that you will be buried in.

For the whole day, we act as if it is our last day,
our only day to face the Truth, forgive ourselves and each other,
remember who we are and why we were born.

Yom Kippur reminds us that we are all dying.

As Rabbi Shefa Gold explains,

"There is no time for regret, worry, fear, no time to put off facing the truth.

On *Yom Kippur* each moment takes on urgency.

We walk through most days only half-alive.

Yom Kippur, like every real encounter with Death,
urges us into the fullness of living.

On *Yom Kippur*, Death becomes our rebbe."

We don't reenact our death in order to be morbid:
it is so that we can make the most out of our lives.

In our morning Torah reading, God offers us a choice:

"I set before you this day life and death."

God then commands us to, "Choose life."

Ironically, it is sometimes by confronting our death
that we are truly able to choose life.

When we are faced with how short a time we have on this earth,
we are often shocked into an awareness

of how important it is to focus on what we value most.

We don't want to waste our precious moments

or leave behind unfinished business or unfulfilled dreams.

We want our lives to have been significant, meaningful.

Indeed, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells us:

"I am convinced that it is not the fear of death...

that haunts our sleep so much as the fear...

that as far as the world is concerned,

we might as well never have lived."²

We don't want to have merely existed.

We want to take full advantage of what life has to offer
as our tradition encourages us to do.

We want to be remembered for our contributions.

Of course, choosing life does not mean

² *One Month to Live*, p. 1.

that we should become self-indulgent or self-absorbed.
While we should certainly think about what might be fulfilling and enjoyable,
we must also consider how we can live righteously and be a mensch.
Before we act, before we decide, before we speak,
we must think about how our actions, our decisions,
and our words will impact others.
We must think about how our behavior
will affect future generations, including our own children and grandchildren.

According to Rabbi Elliott Kukla,
"When the Torah states that God puts life and death before us,
our tradition is not telling us to decide whether to live or die,
but that every choice we make from birth to death matters.
These choices range from how we treat our loved ones
to how we spend money;
from whom we bring into our world view,
to how we choose our food...
Our choices affect not only ourselves, but life on a global level--
when we choose to drive less, spend less, and consume less,
we are choosing life. And we choose life each time
we lift our voices to advocate for civil rights or environmental protection."

We know, of course, that choosing life is not always so easy.
Whether choosing to switch careers in middle age,
or devoting ourselves to a cause for which we might take flak,
there will undoubtedly be a price to pay.
But we certainly pay a much higher price if we do not follow our heart.

Our sages, expressed this in a parable:
"An old man sat on a highway from which there branched two roads,
one full of thorns at the beginning but level at the end,
and the other level at the beginning but full of thorns at the end.
So he sat at the fork of the road and cautioned passersby, saying,
"Even though the beginning of this road is full of thorns, follow it,
for it will turn level in the end.'
Whoever sensibly heeded the old man and followed that road
did get a bit weary at first, to be sure,
but went on in peace and arrived in peace.
Those who did not heed the old man
set out on the other road and stumbled in the end.
So it was with Moses, who explicitly said to Israel,
'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day:
I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Choose life, that you and your offspring may live.”³

What looks like the easy way at first blush,

the path of least resistance,

may turn out to be much more difficult in the long run.

That safe job may be a mind-numbing, spiritual nightmare after 10 years.

That unwillingness to mend our familial ties

because we fear and avoid confrontation,

may ultimately cause heartache and distress.

So as we go forth into the year 5770,

let us choose life.

Following are some of the questions and challenges

offered by the book *One Month to Live* to help us in making this choice:

How can you make best use of your time?

What is the biggest time waster?

Can you find a way to use that time for more significant impact?

What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind?

The key to spiritual health is maintaining a connection to our Creator.

What are the current barriers to spiritual health in your life?

What are you clinging to right now that you need to let go of

in order to move forward in your life?

Write down one risk that you believe God is calling you
to take presently in your life.

What are your fears about taking this risk?

What are your frozen dreams?

If you only had a month to live, whom would you spend the time with?

To whom would you need to apologize?

Who needs to be assured today that you love them?

How have you experienced the results of bitterness in your life?

How is this related to your ability to forgive and be forgiven?

How satisfied are you with the state

of your most important relationships right now?

What's keeping you from moving toward where you want to be
with each one?

When was the last time you stopped to savor a rich moment?

Make a gratitude list of five or six things that you often take for granted.

If you knew you only had a month to live, how would you simplify your life?

What material goods would you give away?

What items on your schedule would go first?

What keeps you clinging to this cargo?

When was the last time you felt passionate about an experience?

³ Midrash Tanhuma (Re'eh 3).

What cause or situation, or people have you always been moved by?
Research ways you can serve them – using your time and your talents.
Commit to a specific goal that will meet some of their needs.
What values do you hope to leave behind?
For what do you want to be remembered?

These questions are in line with what our tradition asks us to do at this time of year. To quote Rabbi Yitz Greenberg:

“Tradition holds that the key to vital living is perpetual renewal of life; it seeks to attain that renewal by generating a continual process of examining life and constant rebirth. The awareness of being judged for life and death is a stimulus to stop living routinely.”⁴

Pirke Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers, tells us that the time is short, the task is great, the reward is great, and the Master is insistent. The great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, puts it this way in the poem, “A Man in His Life”

“A man doesn't have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.
When he loses he seeks, when he finds
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul
is very professional.
Only his body remains forever
an amateur. It tries and it misses,
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,

⁴ *The Jewish Way*, p. 185.

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drunk and blind in its pleasures
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,
the leaves growing dry on the ground,
the bare branches pointing to the place
where there's time for everything.”

Let us hurry. We don't have time to waste.