

**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770**  
**September 18, 2009 ~**  
**Rabbi Micah D. Greenstein, Temple Israel**  
**“The Best Day Of Your Life”**

My college buddy, Andy, had an extraordinary mother named Carole Arch Kramer. Carole died far too young at age seventy. When Carole turned fifty, she invited family and friends to a special 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party. The invitation read: “Dress As You Were On The Best Day Of Your Life.” For the occasion, Carole and her husband George took over a funky little restaurant off the beaten path in SoHo to clear all inhibitions. One couple arrived in a wedding dress and tux. Another wore a collegiate sweater with a varsity letter reminiscent of the couple’s first date. Sophie and Fred showed up wearing the actual outfits they traveled to America in when they immigrated from Poland in the late thirties. (They even carried around a little suitcase that read, “NY or Bust!”) One friend had an armsfull of shopping bags from Saks and Bloomingdales and price tags on all her clothes. For that one woman, I suppose, an uninterrupted day of shopping was the best day of her life.

Andy, my college buddy, wore an outfit he had bought in Pamplona on the day he ran with the bulls in the summer between our freshman and sophomore years at Cornell. Andy’s wife, Debbie, wore lederhosen from a very special hiking day in the Swiss Alps. There were many more outfits at this “Dress As You Were On The Best Day of Your Life” party. If you let your imagination run wild about the range of outfits one could wear over the course of one’s lifetime, you won’t be far off the mark about what people wore – except Carole.

What did Carole wear? She walked in wearing a *brand new* dress! Everyone else was wearing something from their past, but Carole, the brains behind this “Dress As You Were On The Best Day Of Your Life” party, wore something brand new. When the crowd quieted down, Carole said, “The best of times is now.” The theme song of Carole’s life was finding a way to live in the present no matter what. That’s also the message of these high holydays.

Easy to say but hard to practice, huh, especially given recent times? Through family and friends, everyone has been affected not only with financial stresses but with more and more cases of cancer, heart disease, even devastating tragedy. As some of you will experience in one of our Yom Kippur Day discussion sessions, we have so many inspiring survivors of illness within our own congregation alone. And even when cures haven’t been possible, there are people facing the toughest of situations who have still taught us how to live in the present. Including a guy named Mike Morris. In discussing his terminal cancer condition with his oncologist

Mike asked, "Is there any chance I can beat this?" His doctor answered, "There's always a chance, Mike, but with this particular virulent form of what you've got, it's only a question of time."

Mike's not from here. He was a justice of the peace in a small town in Montana. Admired and beloved by everyone, he was a good-looking man, 48 years old, with a full head of thick hair just beginning to turn silver. He jogged four miles every day. His waistline had not changed since his college days. But now he was just another frail human being with incurable cancer, slumped over in a chair having learned that he had 6 months to two years to live. For Mike, the weeks and months following his diagnosis were a rollercoaster, with talk of ending his life one week, and the next week a firm conviction to make the most of each day.

Gradually, the days and weeks began to tap a wellspring of feelings in this man who had spent so many years lost in his own emotional wilderness. He began to talk more firmly about mending relationships with his wife and four children. He allowed his grown sons to massage his back as he wrestled with the pain. One son spent time with him every evening after years of being estranged. Mike and his wife, Sandra, who had grown apart physically over the years, finally found exactly the right embrace to communicate a deep and enduring love.

Before he died, Mike Morris visited most of the places he had wanted to see. And when he died at home with those closest to him by his bedside, he said to them all, "Strange as this may sound, I'm lucky I got this disease and didn't get run over by a train. Because I got this last chance to know just how precious life can be." And then he used Carole Kramer's line. He said, "These have been some of the best days of my life." That's what Mike Morris said and what Ted Kennedy wrote in spite of all of his adversity. They both said, "These have been some of the best days of my life."

Times have been tense lately, even when it hasn't been life or death. I have spent an unprecedented number of hours this past year – nights and weekends – doing my best to help people who have encountered rough times. What I've learned is that it's been more like an onion that only appears to be about finances. Peel it away and you find men who have been conditioned to equate self-worth with net worth. Couples crack. Kids break. Families collapse. I've never experienced anything like the loss of pride and feeling of failure some have shared with me this past year – and while I've been able to help those within my reach in some way, I worry about the pessimism that's creeping into our culture.

The pessimism out there is real, but it has never been the Jewish way. We Jews carry not only the baggage of a great heritage and history. We carry something

else the world needs. We carry the baggage of hope. It may have been rough for us this past year, Judaism teaches, but it will be better for us next year, and if not next year then the year after? And what's the proof? The Jewish people. How many times in our history have we felt that we were at the end of the road and bounced back? If anyone ever wants to give in to despair, let that person look at the history of the Jewish people and reconsider. We're not the ever-dying people; we are the ever-living people. We even gave the world our belief in an afterlife beyond this lifetime. Judaism is life-affirming at its core. Think about it. All the great events in Judaism are joyous events - from the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai to the Exodus from Egypt, to our vision of the future, known as the Messianic Age. If you're thinking about the Holocaust remember that the Shoah has nothing to do with Judaism – it's what evil people did to Jews and others. Hitler is dead, we're still here, and we even have an exhibit in the Temple Israel Museum behind you raising up the goodness of the partisans rather than the evil of the Nazis.

The recent economic tsunami has brought out the pessimists for understandable reasons but we must not give in. To all those here and listening over the phone lines who have had an exceptionally rough year, we extend our prayers for strength. To everyone else who is still entering this New Year with anxiety and trepidation, we wish you security. To the key sustainers of our Temple family who have contributed even more this past year for the sake of the other households who are struggling, thank you for elevating our collective dignity and humanity by your own generous example.

We all know about the pessimism out there, but we must not give in to it. The great early 20th century Reform Rabbi, Dr. Joshua Loth Liebman put it well when he said, "Our Jewish faith realized early on that pessimism is a persuasive doctrine because we all live life with high expectations and the gap between hope and reality is always very wide." Yet our Jewish faith, as Liebman notes, has always maintained an unhysterical and unpanicky mind. Instead, "Judaism remains the quintessential religion of hope."

We Jews are supposed to take seriously the idea that humanity is created in the image of God and therefore each of us is full of worth and dignity and potential goodness. A new baby is not a sinful or hopeless soul in Judaism. Classical Christian theology does emphasize the littleness of humanity in order to glorify the greatness of God. It does stress the evil of man in order to heighten the goodness of God. But this is not the Jewish way.

In fact, Judaism finds it hard to understand how bible readers could ever arrive at pessimism and human depravity when you read all the human qualities ascribed to God. A Bible that could project on to God all the traits and attributes of

humanity must have a high view of humanity, not a low view! Or as Joshua Loth Liebman puts it, “If humanity was regarded to be a sinner or a worthless clod of earth, then why would God be painted in human colors? It is this high respect for the potential greatness of people created in God's image we Jews are supposed to always carry.

Beware of the pessimists. They fold their hands and talk about dark times getting darker. Judaism categorically rejects this approach. Instead, the rabbis preach the will to believe in life and its Source, to believe in tomorrow, no matter what, even if the ways of life and the ways of God can never be completely understood by any one of us.

There is always something to live for in life because there is always something to strive for. When a person stops reaching, stretching, and growing, that person stops living, even if they're not dead yet. So what am I worried about these days as your rabbi? I worry that we are forgetting Judaism's message of hope and confidence in the future – our if-ism. Your Jewish faith and mine teaches that if we stretch and sacrifice and mobilize, we can do what needs to be done to make the world a better place.

Pessimism is everywhere outside these walls. It's even crept into Jewish communal structures. Haven't you all heard that famous Jewish institutional memo? “Worry Now: Details to Follow!” Great joke, but the truth is that Judaism is a happy ending story. History in Judaism's eyes will end with the people of the earth eventually coming together. That's how our bible ends in II Chronicles. Tomorrow can and will be better than today. Despite the low days filled with tragedy, lots of days ahead can still be the best days of our lives, no matter what our past has been. Pessimism has never been part of the Jewish vocabulary. There is not even a Hebrew word for it! In modern Hebrew, the word used is “Pesseh-miut,” from the English!

Why does the Jewish community still have a hard time heeding the warning against pessimism? Perhaps because we – as a community - have internalized centuries of fear and accumulated loss from discrimination, persecution, and in the case of the Holocaust, mass murder. The late Gary Tobin, hands-down the most visionary and leading demographer of Jews in the United States put it well when he said, “The Holocaust, low birth rates, Israel's constant wars, and the rise of Islamic anti-Semitism have reinforced anxiety about Jewish survival. We Jews now comprise only .02% of the world's people. We're only 12 million out of over 6 billion. So, our response to the Holocaust should clearly be to grow the Jewish population. The problem, as Tobin points out, “is that our fears too often create a self-fulfilling prophecy of decline.”

Instead of promoting the joy of being Jewish, the meaning and blessing of Judaism and Jewish community, instead of actively seeking to grow our faith and traditions by welcoming newcomers, we continue to be so afraid of decline that we have created ideologies, responses, and a mindset that only ensures pessimism and loss! For instance, while there is no question that Jewish children are best guaranteed when Jews marry other Jews, why write off the thousands of Jewish children from the 28% of intermarried couples who are raising their children as Jews? If Judaism is so attractive, which I believe it is, then why are we letting our fears overtake us? Dr. Tobin points out how Christians, Muslims, Scientologists - everyone else - welcome newcomers! “Are we Jews,” he asks, “the only ones who want to stay locked in the 18<sup>th</sup> century trying to keep people out? If we do not open the gates and promote the joy of being Jewish, then Judaism will certainly be a part of history, but it will not have a future.”

Not everyone buys into pessimism. Just look at this place, during the tough times, not just the good times. Over 30 households have lost jobs, 400 of 1600 can't afford to contribute much if anything monetarily, yet because the rest of Temple continues to stretch its giving capacity, every man, woman, and child wanting Jewish enrichment through Temple and needing help of any kind is getting it - no matter who one is, what one does, or what one has. Surrounded by pessimists outside these walls, we've had the best year in every department – our religious school, b'nai mitzvah, Hebrew and high school programs under Barb Gelb's direction are thriving. Our adult education offerings are booming. Our Jewish musical offerings have never been broader, regular Friday night shabbat service attendance is rising, not declining, Billy and the Board of Trustees are energized, and with Rabbi Adam Grossman and Rabbi Katie Bauman rounding out the clergy, we've never had a more complete and multi-faceted team. And even with more people hurting than ever before, your officers, trustees, Jeff Manis and the budget committee have balanced this past year's budget with no fudging. Temple had a tremendous year inside these walls and out in the greater community because we refused to give in to the seductiveness of pessimism.

One of the many wonderful children in our religious school has caught our message of hope by the way he answered his mom. This son had finished an awesome rafting trip with his mother down a magical canyon with lots of big water. Driving back, the mom said, “We've had such great adventures, honey, this has been the best summer ever...” The son replied, “No, mom, this isn't the best summer ever, it's the best summer yet. There are so many more to come, mom. It was the best summer yet.”

What a great lesson this child teaches. It's the same lesson my college buddy's mother taught when she showed up wearing a brand new dress. It's the same lesson our high holyday prayerbook teaches with one word – *Hayom* . “*Hayom T'amtzeynu*– Today, God. Today strengthen us.” *Hayom T'varcheynu*. Today, God. Today, bless us. *Hayom T'godleinu*. Today, God. Today, make us greater than we've been. *Hayom Titm'cheinu*. Today, God. Today support us. *Hayom timchol v'tislach lchol avonoteinu*. Today, God. Today, pardon and forgive us all our sins, and help us to see this New Year as a new opportunity.

My dear friends, *Hayom*. Today. It's not just that God is beseeching us today or tonight to make the year ahead another one of the best years of our lives – God is *waiting* for us to seize this eve of a New Year and see in it, the possibility of something new, something beautiful, and unprecedented. Be open to it, because if you don't, you may miss another one of the best days and years of your life. Don't miss the chance God has given us this year and every year, this day and every day. And let us say:

A-M-E-N