

Why is it a custom to wear white on Yom Kippur? Why do we deny our body by fasting from eating, drinking, using lotions, and engaging in intimacy? Why do we recall those who were martyred for the sake of our Torah, our covenant with God? Why do we confess sins and ask for forgiveness? Why do we remember those who gave us life, those with whom we partnered or raised families, those whom we hoped would embrace our values and outlive us, and others who were part of our families?

To put it concisely, we do all these things because we are engaged in a rehearsal and preparation for our death. Preparing to die means taking a serious look at how we live, comparing it with an ideal picture of how we want to live, and making adjustments. As Jews, our ideal begins with our foundational sacred stories, the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, but also encompasses early Rabbinic figures and traditions, other stories from Jewish history, and those from our own families who helped us form the values by which we live.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks suggested that there are:

... two ways of thinking about your life. The first is what you might call the Well-Planned Life. ... Life comes to appear as a well-designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way and brought toward a well-rounded fruition. The second way of thinking about your life might be called the Summoned Life. ... Life isn't a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored.... The person leading the Well-Planned Life emphasizes individual agency, and asks, "What should I do?" The person leading the Summoned Life emphasizes the context, and asks, "What are my circumstances asking me to do?"¹

We might say that our ancestors Abraham and Sarah exemplify the Summoned Life. We began Rosh Hashanah by looking at their stories. Sarah found herself unexpectedly pregnant at an advanced age. Abraham, after setting out on a journey to an undisclosed location at God's command, was further tested by being told to offer up his son as a sacrifice. It's not clear that they understood God's plan for them. When Abraham and Sarah and our ancestors of the past two or three or four generations set out from the old country in search of a different life, they could not have known how they were reshaping themselves and their future. They may have had a sense that they were following their destiny, but they either knew or learned quickly that figuring out what their destiny or purpose was not handed to them on a silver platter. They learned, they adapted, they failed, they stumbled, they made mistakes. They made plans and then followed scholar of religion and mythology Joseph Campbell's advice: "Let go of the life [you] have planned, and accept the one that is waiting for [you]."

Whether by birth or by choice, we have the yoke of a particular world view on our shoulders. And it comes with a set of filters, through which we experience the world. We feel the weight of antisemitism throughout the centuries, we taste the world through the foods absorbed into our culture, we hear the music of Hebrew, and see the *tzitzit* on our garments. We have a collective set of memories evoked by our immersion in stories of the Bible and in Jewish history that inspires us and elevates our souls.

Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen writes:

When I was a Rhodes scholar, I was in a very demanding academic program, trying to cram an extra year's worth of work into my time at Oxford. I decided to spend an hour every night reading, thinking, and praying about why God put me on this earth. That was a very

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/03/opinion/03brooks.html>, August 3, 2010

challenging commitment to keep, because every hour I spent doing that, I wasn't studying I was conflicted about whether I could really afford to take that time away from my studies, but I stuck with it—and ultimately figured out the purpose of my life.... [I]t's easier to hold to your principles 100% of the time than it is to hold to them 98% of the time. If you give in to "just this once," you'll regret where you end up. You've got to define for yourself what you stand for and draw the line in a safe place.²

As Jews, the source from which we derive our principles is Torah. Torah is also our collective, historic memory. Torah is a record of the stories that created the family and the people of Israel. That is why our tradition reveres and honors the memory of our ancestors. They become the story through which we made the choices that brought us to this sanctuary this morning. They are the story from which we distill the elixir of our principles.

Many of us have parents, grandparents or great-grandparents who immigrated to this country, either to escape persecution or to seek a better life in other ways. They may have come with nothing but a sense that they were chasing a dream. Looking back at where their life has taken them, they may have begun to sense that they were guided on their journey by a power greater than themselves. When we are in our teens or 20's, we don't necessarily know the purpose of our lives. In our 30's or 40's, when many have begun to establish careers or raise children, we might have begun to figure things out. But it may not be until our 50's or 60's that we can look back and take measure of our life. We can, however, look at the arc of our parents' or grandparents' lives and see how they might fit into some Divine plan.

The Yizkor service gives us a chance to express our gratitude to God for the gifts that our ancestors gave us. Where did they make an impact, and how did it affect us? Their impact may or may not have been in their career. They may have found fulfillment in their lives in their hobbies, in their volunteer activities, in their religious life, or in their social group rather than their job. Each generation is faced with new challenges, new technology, a different economy, a new set of social norms to navigate. Often, though, we can be thankful to our parents for giving us the tools and the resilience and perhaps some resources to stay afloat.

Corporate and educational consultant in the field of transformation and consciousness, Dr. Judith Rich wrote:

You can make and execute well-crafted plans and they may get you where you want to go. But if you get blown off course, your plans will need to be modified or thrown out completely and a new course charted. ...I'm reminded of a friend, who at age 59, finds himself in a far different place than he planned to be at this point in his life. ... After going through considerable breakdowns and upsets, today he is still looking at an uncertain future. He still doesn't know what is next. However, his attitude has shifted about where he is and what's possible. He had to grieve what he'd lost before he could be free to look ahead; and today, he is free to explore the dreams he'd set aside 20 years ago If you're not living the life you've planned, ... consider this could be a blessing in disguise. ... many people recognize their life plan wasn't theirs at all, but something they took on in order to live up to someone else's expectations. Whose life are you living?³

Abraham and Sarah had a job to do, given to them by God. Were they given the job because it was their passion, did it become their passion because it was their job, or did they do the job and

2. <https://hbr.org/2010/07/how-will-you-measure-your-life>, July 2010

3. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/are-you-planning-for-life_b_669654

find fulfillment of their passion elsewhere? We can ask the same thing about our loved ones who are no longer with us. How did they integrate their hopes and dreams with the reality of making a living, supporting their parents, raising a family, or their religious faith? And what can we learn from their example?⁴

Our Yizkor service is an oasis of memory devoted to our loved ones, the lessons they shared with us during their lifetimes, and the wisdom they can still share with us from beyond the grave. May you find a warm place in your heart for the sweetest of these memories. And may they continually bless your life.

We begin the Yizkor service on page ...

4. Many of the thoughts in this sermon were inspired by Rabbi Baruch Frydman-Kohl, Avraham's Life: Summoned or Well Planned?