

Kol Nidrei 5780
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My father was buried one year ago this morning. I have spoken before about how frugal he was. How he rinsed paper plates, laid them out to dry and reused them; how he would ask the waitress for just a little hot water and slice of lemon, then pull a nasty, used tea bag from his red, plaid flannel shirt pocket and drop it in. These behaviors were the result of a world view, a deeply-held religious and philosophical doctrine often articulated to me in my youth with the Yiddishism “*A bissel iz a plotz* -- a little is a lot.”

Mostly this dogma applied to saving money—in fact, it always applied to saving money. My Dad grew up a skinny kid on welfare, was 18 when he married my 17 year old mom, had 5 children before he was 30 and no safety net if he failed. There was a reason he wasted nothing and reminded us again and again that a little was a lot. There was a reason he buried gold coins under the big tree in the backyard. He knew the worst could happen and his only protection was hard work and pennies saved. His care cost \$150,000 a year as he toughed Alzheimer’s out for a decade. Right again dad.

But a little doesn’t mean a lot in a place like Los Angeles. Ours is a big town, fueled by big ideas, big personalities, and big numbers. And ours is not a little Temple. We are an institution with big ambitions, a big mission, a big heart, a big budget and tonight is the big night in the big room. *Kol Nidre*, the Super Bowl of services. The ironic thing is, Kol Nidre really isn’t about big things.

When people ask me what I’ve learned after all these years as a rabbi, one of them is how little things can come between us. A dropped email. A thank you note that never arrived. A little gossip. A little apathy. An unkind word. A missed birthday. And I have learned how one small moral failure can lead to another and another and another. “Sin,” the Talmud reminds us, “begins with acts as thin as a spider’s web, and becomes as thick as cart ropes.”

History buffs and writers like Ray Bradbury and Stephen King know how much fun it is to play the “what if” game, a game about how different the world would be if just one, small moment in history was altered. Here’s one I think about a lot.

In the early 1900s, a young Adolf Hitler applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and was rejected twice. By his own estimation and that of scholars, this rejection went on to shape his metamorphosis from an aspiring Bohemian artist into the human manifestation of evil. We can only speculate, but it’s safe to assume that if accepted, Hitler might well have been just another mediocre artist who applied himself to watercolors, not genocide.

Little things matter in History and they matter in the universe. Consider the metaphor of the butterfly and Chaos theory. According to Chaos Theory, the things that change the world are often tiny. A butterfly flutters its wings in the Amazonian jungle, and subsequently a storm ravages half of Europe. The butterfly is a symbolic representation of an unknowable quantity—the idea that predictability is impossible because something incredibly small can change everything. The controversy has not yet been settled, but the most recent evidence seems to favor the butterfly.

Any of us who narrowly avoided a car crash because we happened to look up, or were on the plane that didn't crash because we missed our connection or met the one we love by some serendipitous fluke knows that sometimes the tiniest things loom so large.

Benjamin Franklin offered a poetic perspective long before Chaos Theory and the Butterfly Effect:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
For want of a horse the rider was lost,
For want of a rider the battle was lost,
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Whoever created *Kol Nidre* knew the truth about how large the little things in life really are. Think about the *al cheits*; that list of sins for which we are repenting tonight. What's on the list? Murder? No. Rape? No. Treason? No.

Instead, it's the little things—a little gossip, a white lie, a little cash on the side, a little cynicism, an insult, a touch, a little apathy—these are the flutters of butterfly wings and you just never know how much they might end up hurting you or another person.

Kol Nidre is about small transgressions that can make all the difference. But it is also about the little things we can do right that make all the difference. Whoever said "Don't sweat the small stuff" did not understand what tonight is really about.

This has made me think about all the small kindnesses and lessons others have bestowed upon me that have changed my life for the better; the small lessons I have learned from so many of you over these past three decades.

In his 90's Lionel told me: "When you travel do it right. Because when you get to be my age you'll never miss the money and you'll be glad you have the memories." Lionel died this past year but I will never forget him, partly because that little piece of travel advice helped change the son of a guy who reused paper plates and tea bags. Those few words of advice have given me priceless memories with Betsy and the kids that I otherwise would not have.

Debra's dad Max was a suit salesman for 50 years. Many years ago when we were preparing for his funeral, I asked Debra, "Well, just how good a suit salesman was your dad?" "Rabbi," she said, "one time a woman came in to buy a suit to bury her husband in and my dad sold her two pairs of pants." I have never forgotten that little lesson about chutzpah and aiming high.

Thirty-two years ago, Rabbi Fields asked me to attend my first Temple Board meeting and share my plans for a new adult education program. I started with how poorly organized and meager the current offerings were and went on to explain how I was going to fix it all. After the meeting, Rochelle pulled me aside and said, "You know, whatever you criticize was created by someone else who did their best. You might think about whether or not you really need to hurt other people's feelings to get to where you want to be." It was two sentences that said volumes about how I could be a better person.

I went to visit Marilyn when she was dying. She looked up at me—gaunt, spent—and said, "Rabbi, I just want to go to dinner and a movie." To Marilyn...a little was a lot.

When I graduated rabbinical school I asked the handful of my teachers I respected the most what they thought it meant to be a successful rabbi. The best answer was from my Hebrew literature professor Ezra Spicehandler, who was not a rabbi. "A successful rabbi," he advised, "is someone who deeply affects at least three people during the course of his career." Was Professor Spicehandler thinking small—or was he telling me to treat each person with dignity, attention, and the hope of helping to make his or her life better because of the Torah I could teach? I do not know if I have deeply affected three people in my rabbinate, but I do know that I have tried, and that I might well have been a very different sort of rabbi if not for those few words from Dr. Spicehandler.

When I sit with a family to prepare for a funeral, it's almost never the person's resume we end up talking about. It's the little things—the pancakes your Papa made on Sundays. The cage your mom helped build for your pet salamander. The way your dad showed up for you after your divorce.

When I visit a hospital room I see the flower arrangements on the window sill and cards gratefully propped up on the night stand. These small gestures pierce the dark isolation of illness; they really matter.

Each time one of you has reached out to me to say you care, to say thank you, to gently help me be a better person—these small kindnesses and corrections loom very large in my heart.

Think about this grand room for a moment. You might not realize it, but its design is based on an amazing principal of Jewish religious architecture that goes back to the first Jewish sanctuary built 3,000 years ago during the time of the Torah. In most religious architecture the larger the item the holier it is considered to be. Think of the huge Buddhas in Southeast Asia, or the enormous crosses atop churches all over the world. But Jewish architecture is just the opposite. The holiest place in the first Temple, actually called the Holy of Holies, and in ours, is not the dome or some huge Star of David, but the smallest thing in the sanctuary kept within the smallest space—the Torah inside the ark. For our people, a little is not just a lot, it is everything.

I've learned a lot in the aftermath of my father's disease and death. First Alzheimer's stole his memory, then it took his body. Both deaths reveal again and again the power of the seemingly small. It means so much now to remember, to remember everything I can--every lesson, every joke and gesture. Sundays at the roller rink, watching him and my mother glide and dance on wheels, savoring those few happy, graceful moments. How he worked so hard for so long in the bitter Minnesota cold, and the way he loved butter brickle ice cream on a hot summer night. My dad's forgetting disease and his death teach me again and again the greatness of so many tiny, beautiful things.

They are a lesson in essentialism, a stripping away--leaving behind memories of the sweet man that was always at Dad's core, whose kind eyes, even at the very end, lit up when someone, anyone, said "Hello."

In a world where we all want so much, I learned minimal expectations were best. Toward the end when I visited the nursing home, I was grateful if my father was simply awake; the smallest of things.

The last time I arrived in Minneapolis from Los Angeles to visit just for the day it had been months since he had said anything to anyone. When it was time to say goodbye I looked at him, memorizing his blue eyes in case I never saw him alive again, and simply said "I love you dad."

He stared back expressionless, pursed his lips again and again and again, then whispered "And I love you too." Five words.

That turned out to be the last time I saw him alive. Now, I hold on to those five words with all my might. Right again dad. *A bissel iz a plotz*—a little really is a lot.

A bissel iz a plotz--this is the deep truth of Kol Nidre known to our ancestors long ago. We can do so much with so little. How many have changed you with just a whisper of wisdom, a brush of kindness?

None of us can change everything this coming year, but we can all change something. We can all do a little better; a little more. A call. A hospital visit. An “I’m proud of you.” An “I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” We can all be back here next year having gossiped a little less and been a trusted friend a little more. We can all make one change, an easy one, too small to fail, that will make us a little healthier, a little more generous, a little more grateful. We can heal one small fracture in our family, we can whisper one more “And I love you too,” fluttering like the wings of a butterfly....

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