

## **KOL NIDRE SERMON 5776 – FINDING HAPPINESS!**

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**Tuesday, September 22, 2015**

Today marked the beginning of one of the United Nations General Assemblies in Manhattan. Living on 66<sup>th</sup> St. and 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave for years, I am keenly aware of this week. It usually conjures up feelings of annoyance as I only think of how it will affect traffic. I then found myself complaining the other day that the Pope is coming at the end of the week too and what a mess the city and commuting is going to be. But, then I checked myself and realized that beyond the temporary inconveniences of getting around, this is a most historic and wonderful week. As we continue our Days of Awe and take time to reflect and repent....leaders and representatives from around the world are coming together to address important issues globally and manage the state of the United Nations – which is our greatest gathering of countries for human and peaceful causes. Then converging at the same time is Pope Francis' visit to America - bringing his fresh and humble spirit of the Catholic church to their community that has been so desperately seeking something new. It is a tremendous week ahead of much personal, spiritual, global and political discussion and meditation. As a New Yorker, it is so easy to become jaded and blind to the celebrations and important occasions

around us. I have found myself standing on the sidelines of a joyous parade and only feeling frustrated that it was keeping me from crossing the street. I totally missed the moment.

But, there are times that I have been more engaged and delighted with my surroundings than enraged. I was taught how to experience life like that by my parents. By their own actions, my mother and father showed my brother and me how to find joy and beauty in simple moments and how to be blown away by the stunning ones. The way we go about our lives and interpret our daily routine has a direct effect on our inner happiness.

I was raised in the most happy home. In a sweet house in New Rochelle, I grew up with a loving older brother and two tremendously supportive parents. My mother an opera singer at the Met and my father a Cantor at Scarsdale Synagogue, music and spirituality were the foundation of our family and I attribute much of our joy to that. Our music and faith not only kept us all close, but gave us each a “grateful pair of eyeglasses” in which to see the world.

Today, I have an incredible husband and two beautiful boys who all give me huge amounts of love and laughter each day. I have known adversity and have had medical challenges in my late teens and twenties that helped give me more compassion towards the human plight. I have also spent the last 16 years serving congregations as a cantor and along with shadowing my father throughout my life in his work as a cantor, I was given profound opportunities to be there for people at their highest and lowest points. It continues to be an honor and a gift to be in service to the Jewish community. But so I give you an even and honest picture as well, let me say it is also... exhausting!!

This past January, my father drove me here to the Reform Temple of Forest Hills to have a meeting with Rabbi Kaiserman and company about possibly working here. I toted my heavy guitar with me and my Dad would never allow me to schlepp anything on his watch. So, he chauffeured me to the temple and waited in the car for at least an hour. My 1 year old son was in the backseat at the time too and it was freezing out. I didn't worry though because I knew my son was warm and entertained in the car by fun music and my father. I also didn't worry that when I came out, I would be greeted by a grouchy family member that had been waiting longer than expected. I

knew I would walk out to a cheerful man no matter what. Even if my son had been screaming in the car the whole time, I would never know it, because my father would only show the joy and allow you to feel what a pleasure it truly was for him to help.

So, here I am.....I began to work with Rabbi Kaiserman, Rabbi Wood and the rest of the wonderful team here at RTFH at the end of January 2015. My father was serving a congregation in South Salem, New York at the time and working alongside another great Rabbi, Marcus Burstein, who happened to be close friends with Rabbi Kaiserman. So, my father and I traded stories on how awesome it was to work with two wise and warm Senior Rabbis and how much it made sense that two good people like them would be friends. We were very fortunate.

A month later, on February 24<sup>th</sup>, my father was walking out of a congregant's home after doing a Shiva Minyan service when he died very suddenly of a heart attack. He was 74 and we all had no warning. I got that dreaded phone call from a hospital that changes your life forever and turns everything upside down. Thank God for shock and our family being so close – we were able to rally and do all that needed to be done. It was very

strange to be on the other side of clergy responsibilities though. Being at a funeral home as a grieving daughter and not a cantor was tough. Our horror was slowly healed by the love around us. We were raised up by the Scarsdale Synagogue Community, the Jewish Family Congregation (where my father had been serving) and all our family and friends. But, what touched me the most was the love and support I got from this community. Rabbi Kaiserman, Rabbi Wood and our temple president, Phyllis Rosenberg along with her husband and often our right hand man here, Michael Rosenberg, all attended my father's funeral in Scarsdale. I was deeply touched. I received the most beautiful and thoughtful cards from the RTFH community and when I came back to work, I was greeted with the best hugs. I was more moved by feeling love from a congregation that hardly knew me than the ones that had known me all my life. I had only been here a month and hadn't even begun working full time until this past July and this temple embraced me as one of their own – it is something that will always stay with me and I thank you for being there for me in my darkest hour.

A few months after my father died, my dear friend, Kim, passed away after the bravest cancer battle I have ever seen for over 4 years. Kim was my age and left behind a 6 year old son. Our mothers were best friends at Juilliard

together and Kim and I grew up as the two nutty daughters of our two crazy, amazing and talented moms. It broke my heart when I flew to California and sang at her funeral. She asked me to sing “Here I am Lord” and “Ave Maria” at her Catholic ceremony and it was another dark day. Two cheerful and loving people in this world were gone and I wasn’t sure if I would ever know true bliss again without them. At the wake, someone gave me a picture of my Dad and Kim together from years back. It was striking to me that they were both the happiest and most content people I knew.

I fell into a period of deep sadness. Although I don’t suffer from the very real illness of Depression, I felt a deep hint at what that must be like and wondered how I would function each day. But, there were my boys, B’nai-Mitzvah students, Shabbat services and I had to be there. I wanted to be there and I was grateful I was needed. If I hadn’t been, I would have overdosed on the Bravo network on TV with a pint of ice cream. Don’t get me wrong, I still dabbled in that as well as I muddled through my grief. But, life had to go on and work needed to be done.

As I worked towards climbing out of the dark dungeon I was in, I began to explore what seemed to come so easily to my father and Kim....happiness.

Contentment and feeling happy had been on the forefront of my mind for quite a while as I struggled with feeling so depressed and down on life. It led me on a therapeutic quest to figure out what it means to others and myself to truly be happy. I thought if I could harness what created it, then I could find it again.

What I discovered first off is that I am among many - as there are hundreds of books on the subject, documentaries (one from 2011 simply called, Happy, which I definitely recommend). There have even been fascinating polls about the happiness level of each country. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, the United Nations hosts what began in 2012 and is known as the International Day of Happiness. This is an opportunity for countries to have conversations about their people with the support from the U.N on how struggling communities can gain more sustenance, compassion and care. A recent Gallop poll showed that Latin American countries were the happiest with Paraguay, Colombia and Ecuador being the top three. This was based on the affirmative answers to questions such as “Did you feel well-rested yesterday?” “Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?” “Did you smile or laugh a lot?” “Did you learn or do something interesting?” Another survey released by the U.N. ranked Switzerland, Iceland and Denmark as the

top three happiest nations based on life expectancy, social connections, personal freedom and the economy. And if you keep digging, you can find an article claiming other countries and demographics are happier based on other factors. So, like with most “polls”, it’s all subjective.

I wanted to know more about those who found joy through adversity and despite it. I watched documentaries and read about people that had gone through horrific events and most of them were left with a clear sense of themselves, their purpose in life and profound appreciation for each day. I watched a documentary called, An Unreal Dream about Michael Morton, who was convicted of killing his wife in 1986. He always proclaimed his innocence and kept his head high in prison for 25 years. He inspired other prisoners with his great attitude and peaceful demeanor. His only son became estranged from him and even in the depths of his despair, he felt the presence of God in prison and always remained hopeful. He was exonerated through DNA evidence and The Innocence Project in 2011. The prosecutor withheld evidence that would have initially found him not guilty back in 1987 and was convicted of this crime after Morton’s sentence was overturned. Michael Morton had every reason to feel frustration, anger and depression over having lost so much. But, he wasn’t and isn’t . He found

love, reunited with his son and found great redemption in now being a grandfather to a little girl named after his slain wife – which has made up for lost time in many ways. In his interviews, he exudes so much joy. Here are his parting words in the film about his life, ***“Now, everything is different for me.....the conundrums of life, the philosophical paradoxes, the metaphysical problems, I feel like I get it now. I understand suffering and unfairness...I can’t think of anything better to receive than that. I’m good with this, this world, what’s happened to me, where I am going and what I am doing and I know three little simple things now because of that....1) God exists 2) God is wise and smarter than I am and 3) God loves me. You know those three things, then what’s your problem?”***

Those words helped lift me out of the fog. All of sudden, it was so clear to me. I had my father for 74 years and his warmth, teachings and cheerful spirit are always with me. I loved Kim her whole life and am stronger and better for having known her. I’m alive, I have a family, friends, faith, community and I love my work...so what is my problem? Nothing. I have faced my worst fear of losing a parent and I survived it. I have watched a dear friend get cheated out of her life and instead of hating the world for it, I want to live deeper and hold my sons tighter in her honor. God gave us a

promised land and God commanded us to live a certain way...but God doesn't guarantee or promise us happiness anywhere in the Torah – not directly. Our joy comes from G'milut Chasadim, acts of loving kindness, living a righteous life, having the Torah to guide our steps along life's tricky path. It is an unspoken promise if we follow our faith and our hearts. We are commanded to praise God with a joyful heart and it is implied that we will then receive that in return. But, happiness comes out of the challenges and failures within our Biblical text as well. We grow and learn from those journeys...we find clarity and relief from suffering. I appreciate this quote from Winston Churchill **“If you are going through hell, keep going!”**

I thought I couldn't bare the upcoming High Holy Days. I thought the memories of my father in his long white robe with his extraordinary voice would break me down. But, instead they have given me a jubilant heart, sweet pictures in my mind, soothing sounds of Sacred Music in my soul and the drive to be happy against all odds.

Now, when I am sitting in terrible traffic or on a delayed train, instead of wanting to scream, I channel my father and Kim and all the ecstatic faces of those that have walked out of all kinds of wrongful imprisonment and the

joyful smiles of the disabled and sick and only allow a sense of calm to overcome me.

I realize now that whether my father knew it or not, he was driving me to a safe haven that would help me heal during my toughest time – when he drove me to this temple just four weeks before he died. Somehow, God and my Dad placed me where I needed to be during this time. Perhaps, if we take the time to think about it, all of us are driven somewhere and surrounded by comfort we didn't even know we would need when those shocking and painful moments come and that's God at work.

In the coming year, may our grief, sadness, regrets and frustrations melt away and re-form as something that brings us contentment, peace and yes, even happiness. Then, loss, funerals, Yizkor services, all aspects of our faith, community, giving and forgiving all become the same – beautiful lessons and reminders of the love and joys that life has to offer. May we all be inscribed for a healthy, happy and exciting year ahead. Amen!