

In the Blink of an Eye

Sermon - August 18, 2023 - 2 Elul 5783

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Last week I experienced the tremendous joy of visiting New York City with my mother and seven-year-old son. Though Avi's visited the Big Apple before, his last visit was well before the pandemic. He remembers very little about that trip. Now he's a rising second grader. Wise, articulate, funny, empathic, **tall** - growing into an incredible kid. My mom felt it was time to show him her roots; her life in New York before she and my dad moved to California in the late seventies. We agreed Avi was now old enough - and mature enough - to appreciate it.

Funny - it feels like only yesterday he was still in diapers, toddling around our living room with a bottle in one hand and a book in the other.

Life changes in the blink of an eye.

We had such a great visit - Central Park Zoo, Empire State Building, Statue of Liberty, *Back to the Future the Musical* ... It was magical experiencing New York through Avi's eyes. But, all good things must come to an end. Friday morning we made our way through JFK, boarded a sleek new Delta jet, and flew home to Los Angeles.

Shortly after we arrived home, I hopped into the shower ... and my Apple watch told me I had an incoming phone call. It was Rabbi Dara. Friday, closing in on 4pm, I wasn't scheduled to be on the *bimah* that evening. *Huh*. I thought. *I wonder if someone's sick - maybe she needs me to fill in?*

I got out of the shower, went to grab my phone, and saw Dara had texted me:

I have sad news. Can you talk?

My heart sank. That's never good.

I called her right away. She sounded exhausted, her throat sore. She was a million miles away.

"I have something awful to share..." she told me. I could hear her voice breaking. I've worked alongside Dara for over five years and we've shared many tough phone calls. News of longtime congregants taking their final breaths. Departures of beloved staff members. A virus completely upending our lives and livelihoods.

I'd never heard her like this.

It's Chris Falone, she told me. Chris died today. My mind didn't quite compute what she was saying - as if there'd been a split between two realities. I simultaneously pictured Chris in his office, smiling mischievously behind his computer ... and I had absolutely no clue who he was. *Oh right - Chris - who's he?* I felt my head tilt to one side, my breath slowed down. *Wait ... what is she saying?*

And we believe it was a suicide.

My mouth went dry, my stomach churned. I had a million questions. I must have said, *"Oh my God"* ten times. I threw on some clothes and headed straight for Temple.

And here, in the presence of fellow staff who knew and loved Chris, who'd heard the news, who were in shock, devastated and broken and dazed ... seeing them ... these typically bright, smiling, friendly faces streaked with tears ... it became real. These bifurcated realities of *"I know Chris..."* and *"wait - who's Chris?"* crystallized into one.

He's gone.

But he was just here.

I spoke to him two days ago and he seemed fine.

I can't believe he did this.

I wish I'd known - I would have done something.

How is this happening?

Life changes in the blink of an eye.

They say no one knows you better than your family, but ... it's also true that no one spends as many waking hours with us as our **coworkers**. How much the more so when you work at a synagogue, a place so invested in building and sustaining relationships, community, a congregation.

Those of us who've worked here awhile ... well, for better or worse, we know each other's movements and patterns. Likes and dislikes. Quirks. Tastes. Habits. At times we even try to answer questions on other folks' behalf - like, *oh, if Zoe was in this meeting, she'd totally say ... "it needs more color!" Yeah, if David was here, he'd definitely veto.*

At work, you become your own sort of family.

And just as every family has its own "house manager," the one who keeps the engines running, the lunches packed, the bills paid, the lights on - Isaiah had its own: our Building Boss, our Facilities First Mate, keeping the ship afloat. During the worst of Covid, when our programs and presence were entirely online, to quell our anxiety we'd repeatedly share that we didn't really need to be inside the building itself. *Community isn't about a physical structure*, we'd say. And to a certain extent, that was true.

But when we returned to Isaiah, to this holy, physical space, tended to and cared for so lovingly by Chris and his team while the rest of us remained Safer at Home? **My God, it was so emotional.** Folks would enter the

Sanctuary fully masked, tears streaming down their faces. They'd grab our hands tight and remind us of all the beautiful moments and milestones they'd experienced IN THIS ROOM, filled with gratitude to have finally returned.

Because a building *is* important. Being **HERE** is powerful! This room, this wing, this campus, this whole facility - it's a container for our hopes and accomplishments, longing and pain. A space to *gather*. To pray. To learn. To be with one another - *hinei ma tov, how good it is to BE, physically, here together*.

Chris was at the center of a team who made it so.

And now it's the first Shabbat of *Elul*, absolutely our busiest time of year, that time when those hopes and accomplishments, longing and pain reach new heights, when every single one of us - **especially** our Facilities crew - is hustling big time, working long hours, inching us closer to High Holy Days, physically transporting our Isaiah magic to Royce Hall, preparing one another mind, body and spirit for new beginnings ...

... and Chris ...is gone. By his own hand.

Life changes in the blink of an eye.

This Shabbat is the start of a month of introspection and reflection amidst a backdrop of profound, alarming, frightening brokenness. Locally and globally, it is **not** getting any easier to be human.

Tonight, I want to challenge each one of us to access the most vulnerable part of ourselves. I want us to turn inward and take a good, long look around. I want us **now**, at the **start** of Elul, to crack open our hearts - just as we try to do, symbolically, when we pray *Vidui* weeks from now, on Yom Kippur.

And I want us to start **talking**.

At the heart, the very center of this time of year - the essence of what High Holy Days are all about - are two questions: “*who am I?*” And, “*who do I want to be?*”

One cannot authentically engage in that time-honored process of *cheshbon ha'nefesh* without paying close attention ... to one's own **mental health**.

Mental health awareness has long been a pillar of my identity as a rabbi. Indeed, many of you have heard me preach on the topic, you've heard my family's story, you KNOW how seriously I take the emotional health of my loved ones, my friends, every single Isaian, of every age and stage.

We are a community that has - largely - already signed on to the concept that “mental health matters. Mental health **MATTERS**.”

The question I want to ask us - on the precipice of a new year, in the aftermath of a terrible tragedy in our Isaiah family - is this:

“*What are we going to do about it?*”

It is not enough to simply acknowledge “*mental health matters*.” Not when the world outside feels bleak, when our community is hurting, when depression and isolation, fear and loneliness, when *hopelessness* echoes around us in surround sound.

And so I want to challenge us to start **talking**. Really, legitimately talking to one another. About how **hard** it can sometimes feel ... to be human. About the pain we carry with us every day. Here in Los Angeles, a city built upon fantasy and imagination, I want us to **tell the truth**. To be honest with one another, no matter our **age**, our **gender** or **life experience**. To listen with greater intention, to invest in one another's emotional and spiritual health.

Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bah Zeh - all of us are responsible for one another. We are commanded to look out for one another, not just in superficial ways but authentically, lovingly, compassionately, with dignity and grace.

And I want us to be open to seeking therapy or medication, open to speaking ***with professionals*** about how we can better care for our hearts and souls. And if it makes you uncomfortable to hear me say that out loud - that's okay. Actually, it's good! Let's find to sit down together, you and me, and figure out why that is. Let's unpack it, as they say.

Because when we do - we break down barriers. We destigmatize something so often shrouded in secrecy. We affirm for others who may be suffering - you are ***not*** alone. We affirm for ourselves that help is possible. We don't just say "mental health matters," we *prioritize* it. We live it. We teach it and preach it. We make real all that our tradition, our people have taught us for centuries about what it means to be a Jew.

It doesn't solve every problem. It won't make all that is broken whole again.

But life changes in the blink of an eye. And I know - I am absolutely ***certain*** - that whatever tomorrow brings, we need not greet it alone. Together, in community, each one of us can choose to forge ahead with transparency and truth. With communication and clarity. With honesty and integrity.

We can choose to look into each others' souls and ask, *who are you*, and *who do you wish to be?*... as we enter this new year. We can choose to rise. To grow. To change. To evolve. To love, to hold, to inspire, to seek, to laugh, to challenge, to create, to *live*. And thrive.

We can do it. I believe in us. Let it be Chris' legacy - let him teach us to care for one another with tenderness, the way he tended to his art, and his succulents, and this campus, and his loved ones. Let his death not be in vain. May his memory be a blessing to each one of us at this time of year and always.

Life changes in the blink of an eye. So let us hold tight to one another, and to our community, and to our truth. Shabbat Shalom.