

“The Time That Remains”

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Yom Kippur 5787/2026

My ten-year-old daughter listened to this sermon on Yom Kippur morning and offered her blunt review: “It’s dark.”

I reminded her that, yes, the sermon is about death, but also about rebirth, beginning again, and choosing to live this one beautiful, fragile life as fully as we can. She was unconvinced. So, in the spirit of my daughter’s honesty, I’ll let you decide. Hopefully, these themes of death and rebirth, endings and beginnings, will give us the wake-up call we need to choose life, and begin again.

My friend Rabbi Brent Spodek is a bit of a renaissance man. He lives in Beacon, New York, a very artisanal small town north of Manhattan. He owns a dark grey Subaru, three mountain bikes and two coffins. One for him and one for his wife. They’re currently stored in their garage, flat-packed, with a bag of wooden dowels and instructions for their kids, because, you know how it goes: *some assembly required*.

I admire the planning ahead. He has made decisions about something most of us would rather not think about. However, as Jews, one day a year we are **all** asked to think about our eventual death, and friends, that day is here.

On Yom Kippur we are meant to confront our death, not only with words, but with actions. Today we stop nourishing our bodies and refrain from bathing, sexual intimacy, and tending to our physical selves. All the things that keep us alive, we are asked to stop. We wear white as if we are wrapped in Jewish burial shrouds, and we recite the *Vidui*, a confessional prayer we are instructed to say before we die.

Because no matter how many supplements we take, our lives will end before we are ready with work left undone, words left unsaid, apologies that were neither given nor received. **We will all leave this world wishing we had more time.**

Jewish tradition recognizes the heartbreak of leaving before we are ready. There’s an exquisite passage in *Kohelet Rabbah* (commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes¹) which teaches that *none of us* will achieve more than half our dreams in our lifetime.²

Yet our tradition also recognizes a profound truth: without the urgency of Yom Kippur, *we might not even reach half*. Without rituals that remind us that death is inevitable and today might be our last, we could easily slip into a life of distraction, unawareness, and routine. We could continue avoiding hard conversations, keep refusing to forgive, and build a wall around our hearts even though we are desperate to declare our love.

Life can be terrifying. And we might think this rehearsal of our death is meant to frighten us into change, but I think the opposite is true. Yom Kippur is an invitation to wake up. If we knew that today was our last day, how would we return to the people we love? How would we talk to the people we’ve hurt? How would we make space for the apologies that come from those who have hurt us? And if that wasn’t

¹ Fun fact: Ecclesiastes, also known as *Kohelet*, is read aloud during the holiday of Sukkot.

² *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:13 Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Aivu: A person does not leave the world having achieved even half of his desire; rather, if he has one hundred, he wishes to turn them into two hundred. If he has two hundred, he wishes to turn them into four hundred.

enough to consider, Jewish tradition adds in one more astonishing invitation: If we are granted another year to live, how will we live differently?

Before I continue, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that in this community today, there are people who are living with a terminal diagnosis. Confronting mortality and considering the hours that remain is a daily endeavor. To those of you I know and love (and to the many more whose stories I have yet to hear), I want to say, for you, the themes of Yom Kippur are ever present. You could probably give this sermon. So if you will indulge me, right now, while you and everyone here still has time, let's consider together how we want to live.

Here's something fascinating about Jews and death: For a people so determined to live, we have spent a lot of time wondering *what happens after we die*. That might sound strange to some. After all, we're the tradition that doesn't believe in Heaven and Hell; our focus is on this world, not the next...right?

Well, sort of.

Judaism actually holds a vast kaleidoscope of "afterlife" options from total Nothingness, to the migration of souls through Reincarnation, to a mystical return to the Garden of Eden. But the one I have always found most interesting is called *Olam Ha-Ba*, the World to Come.

To understand the World to Come, we first have to understand where we are right now. Today, we are all living in *Olam Ha-Zeh*. This world. And up until the late Second Temple period, this world was enough. There was no afterlife waiting in the wings. But, then, the system shifted.

It seems there were some concerns about fairness and justice that were getting harder to explain. The rabbis had defended a worldview in which God was expected to deliver reward and punishment fairly, transparently, and in a timely manner right here, before we died. But the daily reality of human suffering provided a growing pile of heartbreaking evidence this wasn't always happening. Good people suffered while bad people won the lottery.

By the turn of the common era,³ Jewish leaders realized they needed a new approach: If Divine Justice couldn't be fully realized in the short span of a human life, what if we **extended the playing field** and created more time and space for things to finally be made right? Enter: The afterlife, *Olam Ha-Ba*, the World to Come.

Suddenly, we had a new option in which blessings and punishments were no longer bound by birth and death. In *Olam Ha-Ba*, rewards could be granted, and punishments meted out, in the world to come. And with this bold theological move, the afterlife offered something this life could not: **more time**. Time for justice to be done. Time for what was broken to be repaired. Time for the unfinished business of this life to finally be made right.

³ *Olam Ha-Ba* first emerged as an idea during the Second Temple period but really took form with the early Rabbinic sages around 100 BCE. e.g. Pirkei Avot 4:17 "One hour of repentance and good deeds in *Olam Ha-Zeh* (this world) is better than all the life of *Olam Ha-Ba* (the World to Come); and one hour of spiritual bliss in *Olam Ha-Ba* is better than all the life of *Olam Ha-Zeh*."

I wonder, if just like our ancestors, we hope there's a World to Come where everything gets worked out: where our brokenness will finally be healed. I wonder, if just like our ancestors, we're scared that this is all there is, and this is all the time we have.

Which is why Yom Kippur's challenge is exactly the invitation we need to set ourselves up for the New Year. We face death, *only* so that it helps us prepare for a return to life.⁴ And this is why we ask ourselves, again and again, until it sinks in: *If this is it, what will we do with the time that remains?*

Look, even if we "understand the assignment," that question might trigger panic: Instead of seeing possibility, we see all the ways we might fail. We're too messy and broken to get our lives together. We won't find the right words. We'll fail to mend our relationships before time runs out.

But here's a hidden truth about this world: **Jewish law actually builds in more time.** To understand how, I want to borrow a brilliant concept from the soccer fields of this past summer's World Cup...a little something called Stoppage Time.

Stoppage time is that mysterious, uncredited pocket of time awarded to the teams after the regulation 90 minutes have officially run out. *It extends the game.* Only the referees know exactly how much time will be tacked on for substitutions, injuries, and VAR reviews. The players don't get to choose the number; they simply have to work fiercely within the bounds of whatever added time they've been given, knowing that when that final whistle blows, *and one team is in the lead*, the game. is. over.

Stay with me on this analogy, because here is what I want to suggest: We are about to receive exactly four days of Stoppage Time. What if we don't say goodbye to the intensity of Yom Kippur when it ends tonight? What if we hold onto it and let it move us through the next four days? What if we take advantage of the space to do what might end up being all the work? Can four days make a difference? It just might.

If we're willing to try, then four days from now, we will be ready to say thank you and goodbye to Yom Kippur and enter the holiday of Sukkot. On that day, Judaism will ask us to step outside, build a fragile little house called a *sukkah*, invite our favorite people over for dinner, and celebrate the gift of our existence. Sukkot is not simply "the holiday after Yom Kippur." It is the embodied answer to Yom Kippur. It's another physical ritual designed to make us experience something rather than merely think about it.

On Yom Kippur, we confront our mortality; *on Sukkot, we practice being alive.*

On Yom Kippur, we confess what we regret; *on Sukkot, we act on what we promised.*

On Yom Kippur we accept that our lives are temporary; *on Sukkot, we celebrate the life we actually have.*

Yom Kippur invites us to imagine the end. *Sukkot asks us to experience what it feels like to have been handed another beginning.*

And perhaps that is the afterlife we can all believe in.

⁴ Another fun fact: Traditional Yom Kippur liturgy will refer to Resurrection in the Amidah (*m'chayyei ha-metim*), the Garden of Eden in Yizkor (*El Male Rachamim*) and the World to Come in Yizkor and during the Martyrology (*El Male Rachamim + Eleh Ezkara*), but most of us will only catch the explicit messaging from the Reform movement's decision to chant Torah from Parashat Nitzavim in which we hear the command to "Choose Life!"



Not an assurance that everything will be neatly resolved in the next life, but the breathtaking possibility that we can return to this world, right now, and live differently within it.

Judaism's answer to the heartbreak of mortality isn't always to promise us another world. Sometimes its greatest mercy is simply giving us another chance in this one.

Of course, a second chance is only as good as what we do with it. If Sukkot is our literal invitation to build something new and begin again, what might it mean for us to actually practice that beginning? There's only so much transformation you can experience while sitting in these seats today. If we're going to accept this gift of Sacred Stoppage Time, then you'll need to see this through until Sukkot. Today you're getting the question, and over the next four days I'm inviting you to build your answer.

First, there's still work to be done. Don't let Yom Kippur end tonight...not when there are things you still need to say. I'm sorry. I love you. I'm really going to try to do better. Use the next four days to say them.

Second, four days from now, you are cordially invited to experience rebirth in a sukkah. So I need you to go sit in one. We have a sukkah at Temple Isaiah on the Vollmer Deck. Or, you might even have the PVC pipes or wood stored *in the back of your garage* to construct your own. Think of it as a journey from one chair to another: from the seat where you confront your death today, to the seat where you will rejoice in being alive...life can be lost and found all over again.

And finally, when the intensity of today begins to fade, get up and go outside. In the weeks ahead, you will have moments when fear makes you question whether change is actually possible. You will wonder if you are truly worthy of a second chance, or if you even have the capacity to do better. When that happens, and the holiness of this room feels a million miles away, remember a profound ritual our ancestors instituted for the end of *shiva*.

At the conclusion of the seven days of mourning, the tradition dictates that the mourners must physically "get up" from their low chairs, walk out the front door, and take a symbolic walk around the block. It is a deliberate, physical re-engagement with the outside world. It is a striking reminder that we are not dead, even as we carry the heavy memories of what we have lost. We are still here. We are alive. And we are commanded to live.

We often imagine rebirth as leaving the past behind. The old self dies; the new self gets a completely clean slate. But on Yom Kippur, we don't leave anything behind. We carry our mistakes and regrets along with our hopes and dreams into the New Year.⁵

That's why the midrash, the story, of the Israelites carrying both set of tablets with them through the Wilderness and into the Promised Land, is so memorable and surprising: Inside the Ark of the Covenant, the broken, shattered tablets are held alongside the whole.

⁵ Jewish tradition holds that while the Book of Life is inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, the final judgment is not actually delivered until the end of Sukkot. Hoshana Rabbah acts as an absolute final deadline - an extension of the high holiday season - giving people one last physical opportunity to repent and change their fate before the heavenly gates completely close. Thus, on the final day of Sukkot, you may see worshippers take a bundle of willow branches and strike them against the ground to dislodge the leaves symbolizing the casting away of sins and shedding of the past.

And maybe that's the radical redefinition of Teshuva we need right now: We are not expected, in perfect synchronization with the New Year, to wipe the slate clean and become a brand-new person. Instead, we are commanded to *get up*, broken pieces in hand, *and return to this world to try again*.

Which means, four days from now: You might sit in the sukkah and still be grieving. You might sit in the sukkah and still be angry. You might sit in the sukkah and still have *absolutely no idea* what you're doing with your life. That's okay.

The point is that you step into the sukkah as the person you are: a person who has faced mortality, accepted human limitation, and resolved to practice living as if you have been given another chance at life.

In four days, we are about to sit in a fragile, impermanent structure that might not make it through the end of the holiday thanks to El Nino...and, nevertheless, find joy. As the Torah teaches: וְשִׂמְחַת בְּחַגֶּיךָ (v'samachta b'chagecha) "You shall rejoice in your festival (Sukkot): you, your son and daughter, your male and female servant, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow who are within your settlements." (Deuteronomy 16:14-15) Joy is commanded, and, more importantly, we are invited to create it together.

Like the sukkah, nothing about our lives is permanent. We will all die. All of our relationships will end. Everything we have built will eventually disappear. But consider this: the chutzpadik claim of Judaism is that even with all the evidence pointing towards loss and regret and pain, Judaism acknowledges it all, and still compels us to light the Shabbat candles, dance at the wedding, go to bed with gratitude *as if it's our last day*, and, if we are blessed to wake up in the morning, *one more time*, to give thanks for our return to life.

So what are we going to do with the time we have left?

We're not asking for another year of life just so we can blow out more candles. We want more time because this life, in spite of its pain, is also breathtakingly, heartbreakingly, unimaginably beautiful.

You have been given another beginning. Now go and live it.

Thank you to my rabbinic thought partner, Rabbi Asher Knight, and my beloved writing coach, Michele Lowe, without whom the High Holy Days would feel like an impossible mountain to climb. To Rabbi Brent Spodek, coffin-builder, nature enthusiast, and teacher extraordinaire, for the story that started all of this. And to the many eyes and ears that helped shape this sermon: your stories, insights, and reactions made it possible. May we all be blessed with a year in which we choose, again and again, to step back into this beautiful, fragile life.