

**L-I-V-E!****Rabbi Mari Chernow Rosh Hashanah sermon 2021 | 5782**

It has been said that if you listen carefully over the years, you will realize that that every rabbi has basically one sermon. We shift it a little bit. We dress it up in stories from the weekly Torah portion or statistics or articles we've read but we each have one central message. It's part of who we are and we return to it time and time again. I'm going to save you a lot of time by giving mine now. And then, I want to talk about how it applies to all of us and the Jewish life we're going to lead together.

We're here on Hollywood Boulevard so I'll start with a movie. You may remember Harold and Maude, a darkly comic cult film of the 1970s. Harold is a young man who is obsessed with death. He drives a hearse, stages elaborate fake scenes of his own death and has one hobby – attending funerals. He befriends Maude, a vivacious eccentric 79-year-old woman. Though Maude also enjoys funerals, she is quite the opposite. Deeply taken with every stage of the life cycle, she is in this lifetime to live it. She models nude for an ice sculptor, “plays” the player piano, has audacious run-ins with the law. She is the self-appointed liberator of plants and animals and the slightly crazy grandmother we all wish we had.

As their friendship grows, Harold explains his fascination with death. “I haven't lived” he says, “I've died a few times.” He talks about the time he accidentally caused a chemical explosion. In the chaos that ensued, he was presumed dead. The misunderstanding highlighted the emptiness in his life and he tells Maude sadly, “I decided then that I enjoy being dead.”

To which she responds, “I understand. A lot of people enjoy being dead. But they are not dead really. They're just backing away from life. *Reach* out. Take a *chance*. Get *hurt* even. Play as well as you can. Go team, go. Give me an L! Give me and I! Give me a V! Give me an E! L-I-V-E, LIVE!”

Most of us are not obsessed with death like Harold, but there are times when we feel...deadened. When we go through the motions. When we're half asleep. There are times when we choose to be a little bit dead. Because living is hard.

*Uvacharta bachayim*, says our tradition. Choose life. Not the way those words are politically charged today. It's tempting to go there but I'll save it for another time. When you are

living, choose life. Even when it's really really hard. Reach out. Take a chance. Get hurt even. Which will mean, without a doubt, facing setbacks, loss, disappointment, regret. To be clear, some pain is devastating. Some circumstances that are more difficult than any human being should have to bear. You will never hear me defend God or try to wrap up neatly the tragic or the traumatic. Never.

But *some* of our pain is the natural result of being alive and bumping into others along the way. And *some* of our pain is valuable to us. Just like physical pain it is an indicator of a deeper issue that needs attention. It won't let up until we do the very work we are here on these High Holidays to do. Reflect on our lives. Point ourselves in a better direction. I think, for example, a lot about regrets. And how we move from the crushing weight of shame to forgiveness and learning. I always come back to the time *I* nearly caused an explosion. I was taking a backpacking course. I think it was the second day. I didn't quite remember how the instructors had taught us to set up the stove. It was a small valve and a big mistake. When the fire was put out and everyone was safe and sound I made the obvious decision - to spend the rest of the ten-week course in my sleeping bag. Stay asleep. Take no chances. Make no mistakes. An instructor came by to console me with these words, "Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment."

The pain is the price we pay for living. Matched only by the depth of what we learn.

I have a few texts that I return to every few years. One of them is Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Rilke, who was small and sensitive, had spent five miserable years in a military academy. A student at the very same academy wrote to him years later asking how to maintain a creative spirit in this rigorous and severe setting. I think that's why the book reads like a High Holiday text to me. It is about finding meaning and beauty in a harsh world.<sup>1</sup> Which – at least in part – is what we are doing here. Finding meaning and beauty in a world that we don't control. And, decades before we all discovered mindfulness, Rilke advises his mentee to dive deep into his most honest emotions. And to resist the urge to rush through them. Writing, he says, requires presence. What he means is living requires presence. And patience. "*All things,*" he says, consist of carrying to term and then giving birth...await humbly and patiently the hour of the descent of a new clarity...To be artist means not to compute or count; it means to ripen as the tree, which does not force its sap, but stands unshaken in the storms of spring with

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<sup>1</sup> Description from the book's forward by Kent Nerbern.

no fear that summer might not follow.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere he admires those who have “a relationship to life greater than just being alive.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s what we’re going for. A relationship to life greater than just being alive. Consider the story of Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn. After he died, someone asked one of his students what were the most important things to him. The answer: “Whatever he happened to be doing at the moment.”<sup>4</sup> He didn’t miss a thing, because he was there, in it. All the time. He stood unshaken in the storms of spring with no fear that summer might not follow.

Reach out, take a *chance*, get *hurt* even. *Make a gigantic mistake*. Then, fix what you can. And learn from the rest. L-I-V-E, live! *U’vacharta bachaim*. Choose life.

There it is. That’s my sermon. In my mind, all the rest is commentary. Now we go and learn it. Which brings me from me to us. Temple Israel of Hollywood is vibrant and alive. Our history alone is stunning...Rabbi Nussbaum, Dr. King, giants of arts and entertainment over the years. Rabbi John Rosove and his loving, steady and visionary leadership of over 30 years. The moment borne of tragedy two years ago that turned into triumph as your three female clergy members – Rabbi Missaghieh, Rabbi Hudson and Shelly Fox - stood right here, arms outstretched and blessed you for a healthy and holy future. I am humbled to be a part of our outstanding schools which teach and model living our values. I have admired TIOH’s social justice program from afar for years. And, truly, I have never seen anything like the arts and culture program. One might ask why a synagogue hosts such a robust arts program. But we said just few minutes ago that we are searching for meaning and beauty. I can’t think of a more natural home.

And with all of that and more, I wonder – are there areas of Jewish life in which we are... still in the sleeping bag? I don’t mean us. I mean American Jewry in 2021. It is well known that Jewish life is changing and that religious affiliation on the whole is declining. We can no longer rely on a sense of obligation alone to produce a steady stream of new members.

It sounds like a good time for a pep talk from Maude. Reach out. Take a chance. Get hurt even. I believe in my heart of hearts that the Jewish tradition is here to be *lived*. To make our lives better and deeper. Prayer, learning, halakha, ritual, life cycle events. Those are very

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<sup>2</sup> From Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, kindle edition, location 296.

<sup>3</sup> From Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, kindle edition, location 682.

<sup>4</sup> From Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*, kindle edition, location 9007.

important. They are also technologies to make our lives better and deeper. I also believe – stubbornly – that every single person has a rich internal spiritual life. Some of us just use different language for it. A robust Jewish life is fully available, for example, to those who don't much like praying. To those who are certain that God is a concept we made up to make ourselves feel better. And to those who never learned or can't remember the difference between Tashlich and the Talmud, Mishnah and midrash, kvelling and kvetching. We can still meet face to face, heart to heart, tell our stories and dip into the deep well of strategies for coping that is the Jewish tradition. Thousands of years worth of strategies to help us feel less lonely and more supported. More thoughtful, intentional, awe-filled and without a doubt, more hopeful.

That's why you are so proud – rightfully – of the extraordinary programs you have put on here and the extraordinary leadership you have taken in our harsh and broken world. Those efforts made you feel alive. They were ways of choosing life and choosing Jewish life at the very same time. That's the nexus I dream about.

So, here's the question...where else is there room for TIOH to take the lead? Where else are we willing to take a chance? To apply a spirit of creativity and experimentation? [like you did when creating this minyan] Where else can we find bold thinking, open hearts, and a willingness to learn from those experiments that fail? Good judgment comes from experience.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook said, "we must know the full depths of the greatness of the old *and* know how the new constantly walks together with it and makes it whole."<sup>5</sup> The old, the new, the challenging, the comforting, the personal, the communal, the lofty, the intimate, the passionate, the serene, the traditional and that which has yet to be invented. There's room for all of it. As we choose this life – and this Jewish life - together. Are you ready to get started?

Shana Tova um'tukah.

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted by Rabbi Dov Linzer in <https://library.yctorah.org/2018/03/see-and-sanctify/>