

Leaving a Legacy

Rabbi Elizabeth Dunsker

Yom Kippur 5772

The poet Yehudah Amichai writes,

And what is my life span? I'm like a man gone out of Egypt:
the Red Sea parts, I cross on dry land,
two walls of water, on my right hand and on my left.
Pharaoh's army and his horsemen behind me. Before me the desert,
perhaps the Promised Land, too. That is my life span.

Open closed open. Before we are born, everything is open
in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed
within us. And when we die, everything is open again.
Open closed open. That's all we are.

What then is my life span? Like shooting a self-portrait.
I set up the camera a few feet away on something stable
(the one thing that's stable in this world),
I decide on a good place to stand, near a tree,
run back to the camera, press the timer,
run back again to that place near the tree,
and I hear the ticking of time, the whirring
like a distant prayer, the click of the shutter like an execution.
That is my life span. God develops the picture:
White hair on my head, eyes tired and heavy,
Eyebrows black, like the charred lintels
above the windows in a house that burned down.
My life span is over.

I believe with perfect faith that at this very moment
millions of human beings are standing at crossroads
and intersections, in jungles and deserts,
showing each other where to turn, what the right way is,
which direction. They explain exactly where to go,

what is the quickest way to get there, when to stop
and ask again, There, over there. The second
turnoff, not the first, and from there left or right,
near the white house, by the oak tree.

They explain with excited voices, with a wave of the hand
and a nod of the head: There, over there, not *that* there, the *other* there,
as in some ancient rite. This too is a new religion.
I believe with perfect faith that at this very moment.

This is only a portion of a much longer poem where Amichai struggles with
the experience of life and it's purpose. He struggles with the feeling that
everything may be open before us, and yet inside of us we are closed with
desert or Promised land in front of us, but we can't really tell which one. He
struggles with the feeling that life is primarily a running back and forth until
we become frozen. That everywhere we turn people are telling us which
way to go.

I don't think he's wrong. I think in many ways for many of us, that is the
experience of life. We run here to there, listening to what others say around
us, and we don't ever really know what lies before us. But there is another
way. We can allow the world of opportunities to open before us, we can
listen to our own hearts and minds rather than be controlled by those
around us, and we can create the picture of our lives, of ourselves that we
want. We have examples of people who used their lives in just those ways
and in doing so they improved all of our lives.

This past year, we mourned the death of Debbie Friedman. Debbie was a
force of change in our Jewish communal lives. She wrote music and sang
words that were meaningful to so many people. But saying that barely
scratches the surface of what she did during her life. Debbie began writing

her music and recording albums in the early 70s. She took Hebrew prayer and combined it with folk melodies and brought new meanings to old words. For the Reform community especially, she taught us how to pray in a different way. Between 1971 and 2010 she released 22 albums filled with music that was spiritual, educational, intellectual. In the 1990s, she began to suffer from a neurological ailment with symptoms like multiple sclerosis, this made it difficult for her to give concerts and travel, but she did it anyway.

When she was admitted to the hospital earlier this year, and we were praying for her health, and after she died, we spent some time during our Friday evening services remembering her and telling stories about her. Many of us had met her or been to a concert or experienced her in person in some way. I told the story of her historic Carnegie Hall concert. At the time I was a youth group advisor in Lawrence, Long Island, and I felt so fortunate to have scored 10 tickets to the concert for my students. These tickets were not cheap, and everyone was trying to get them. I lived in NY city at the time, and my students were supposed to take the LI Railroad into Penn Station, and I would meet them and get them to Carnegie Hall. Except that there was a blizzard that day. The Long Island parents were not going to send their children on the train with the risk that they might be stranded in the city later. So there I was with 10 tickets. I went to Carnegie Hall and hoped that I might sell the tickets out front, surely there were still plenty of people who wanted Debbie Friedman tickets. But when I got there, I found myself standing outside in a snow storm along with every other youth group advisor in the tri-state area trying to sell, give away, get rid of

in any way we could these tickets that just a day before had been the hottest thing in town. I think in the end I sold two tickets before my fingers and toes lost all feeling and I went in and took my seat in a row by myself. All of us who were there still felt that we were the lucky ones who were able to make it in. We were the ones who would get to hear Debbie Friedman perform in Carnegie Hall. Overall the concert was everything I had expected, except. Except that Debbie didn't want us singing with her except when she wanted us singing with her.

Debbie Friedman wrote these songs that were designed to be sung by congregations, by kids at camp, by anyone and everyone. But at her concerts she could get a little snippy about making sure we could hear her. Now of course we had all come to hear her, but we had also come to sing with her. When it came to singing the Mi Sheberach—It is her melody that our congregation sings, she said to us, “I will sing the first verse to you, I want you to listen and accept it as a blessing from me to you. Then we will all sing the second verse together.” Well it didn't go like that. She began to sing, and of course the audience began to sing it with her. And she did this thing. She frowned at us and shook her head and became visibly angry with us for wanting to sing with her. It kind of put me off of her for a while. At our services, others shared similar experiences of Debbie in concert yelling at the audience to be quiet.

But then years later, I met Debbie in person. She was invited as our scholar-in-residence to a Women's Rabbinic Network conference. She was a part of our group for four days, and during that time I grew to love her all over again. In person she was a most loving and giving woman. In person

everyone felt connected to her and felt real caring from her. The struggle with her illness was apparent at moments when her exhaustion and discomfort took her away from the group, but at other times she was exceptionally powerful.

Debbie's death this past year was a tremendous loss. At only 59 years of age we lost all the wonderful stories she would tell with her music in the future, and all the old prayers she would breath new life into. But oh what she gave us before she left. So many songs for so many moods, so many blessings, so many melodies. She left us music that will continue long after those of us who were disappointed by her in concert but uplifted by her in person have gone away. Those personality quirks for good and for bad will be forgotten, but the legacy that she left of music that sustains us and our services will go on.

Amichai believed the snapshot that God took of him was of a man with white hair, tired eyes, and dark eyebrows that look like what is left after a fire has burned down a house. He believed that God saw a man who had lived through sorrow a man who was tired from life, and yet a man who survived, who was what was left after the fire. I imagine the snapshot that God might take of Debbie would look like all those snapshots of her, holding a guitar and singing with a smile. I don't expect the image to be the one of a painful struggle with health or an annoyance with her adoring audience, just smiling and singing with her guitar. She wrote, "We are powerful. It is hard to remember that. Sometimes life takes its turns into the unknown and presents us with challenges we would have preferred not to encounter under any circumstances. Suddenly we are confronted with

our pain. It is a strange thing that pain creates beauty and potential for healing. It is hard to imagine that it can provide a foundation for beautiful moments to arise. We attempt to find a way to manage survival from one minute to the next, as pain becomes the overriding force. When we are experiencing emotional discomfort, we need to find a safe place to express our grief and loss. The willingness to both offer and receive blessings of healing and well-being allows one who is wounded to transform and unravel their pain. Our pain need not bury us, instead it may elevate us to the point of healing - if we choose to allow it.” That’s what she’s left us.

This past Wednesday we lost a powerful force for civil rights. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth died at the age of 89. He grew up poor in Alabama; he started out as a truck driver, and later became a Baptist Minister. He began his service as the pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1953. And he fought for the rights of African Americans with ferocity from that moment on. He was very clear about his mission in the world. He would fight for equality with his life. He often said that he “tried to get killed in Birmingham” in order to bring attention to the injustices that were everywhere. He said that he had been bombed twice, beaten into unconsciousness, and jailed at least 35 times. Shuttlesworth was rough and uncompromising. Diane McWhorter whose book, “Carry Me Home” chronicles the experiences of Birmingham during the height of the Civil Rights era, told the LA Times earlier this week, "Shuttlesworth and King were the two major axes of the SCLC part of the movement. Shuttlesworth was in the vanguard of direct action, pushing towards confrontation. King was the person who could really deal with white people and was more

conciliatory. The two of them together formed a dialectic that drove the movement forward."

Fred Shuttlesworth was very clear about what needed changing when it came to the lives of African Americans, he was not so compassionate to the needs of the gay and lesbian community however. In 2004, he lent his name to a campaign in Cincinnati to stop the city from passing a gay rights ordinance. He had multiple marriages and messy divorces. He was forceful and rough. There were many things about him not to admire, but he too left a powerful legacy of change for the better. I expect his snapshot might be of the time when he suffered chest injuries from the water hoses he was sprayed with while in the midst of a non-violent protest.

And of course, no discussion of legacy this week would be complete without a look at the life of Steve Jobs. I know, I know, for the past few days we have all been bombarded with tributes to Steve Jobs, every wonderful thing he ever said has been posted to facebook, used in commercials, and I even received an email yesterday from Chabad nationally using Steve Jobs and an apple style ad encouraging folks to find a local Chabad where they might observe Yom Kippur. But here's the thing he was an important innovator for our world. Whether you enjoy Apple products or not, one cannot deny that his innovations have moved our world of communications and the way we do work forward in a way that no one else has within their own lifetimes. He's done so much that much of his contributions are no longer even noticed. The funniest thing I've seen so far was the twitter feed from Westboro Baptist Church, they are planning to protest his funeral, just as they like to protest the funeral's of soldiers and

the victim's of hate crimes. In her tweet, Fred Phelps' daughter wrote that he "gave God no glory and taught sin." Of course at the bottom of her tweet was the note that it had been sent using an iPhone.

When I first met Jeff in Austin, he was then working for Apple in Austin. Steve Jobs had been returned as the CEO of Apple and the main work he was doing at that time was cutting projects left and right. The stories were that he would meet with project groups, listen for a few minutes, and then mid-sentence tell them the project was cancelled. Almost all of Apple was located in Cupertino, CA, but all of the support services were located in Austin. Jeff had his speech ready. Should Jobs come to Austin looking to close that facility and move everything to Cupertino, Jeff had his elevator speech prepared to convince him of all the good reasons to keep the Austin branch open. It never came to that, but the fear was out there that there were no sacred cows in the company, and that Steve Jobs might cut anything that wasn't pulling its weight at any time. He was ruthless about his vision, he was absolute about how things should run and how they should look and he did not take "no" for an answer. In order to create the latest laptops, a new technique to punch holes in aluminum had to be developed so that the holes were so small that you couldn't see the opening for the sleep light when the computer was awake. Not only that, the slow on off of the sleep light is timed to mimic human breathing. A person like that could make you crazy. A person like that might be hard to live with or hard to be the child of.

And yet, what brilliance, what innovation, what vision. Steve Jobs did not care about current conventions, he was not sentimental about past

achievements, he was genius about seeing what needed to happen next and moving in that direction unabashedly. I'm sure you've heard these great quotes of his a million times during the last couple of days, but I can't help myself, I have to say them here again. Here's words were so good and so appropriate for Yom Kippur when we consider our lives and our deaths. In his commencement speech to the Stanford graduates of 2005, he said,

"If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something. . . . No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true.

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary."

For the past six months Jobs knew that he was dying, and he moved quickly to do what was necessary to prepare for that next moment in his life as well. He resigned as the CEO of Apple, and spent time only with the people in his life he wanted to spend time with. Only his family and his very closest friends. An authorized biography of him will be coming out soon, and when his biographer asked him why after all these years was he finally allowing his life to be written, he said because he wanted his children to

know him. There were a lot of times he wasn't there and he wanted his children to understand what it was that he had been doing and he wanted them to know really who he was. What impresses me so is that aside from all the great achievements and world renown, he was very clear on the roles he may not have fulfilled as well and worked toward the end of his life to correct those relationships that needed fixing.

What would the snapshot be of Steve Jobs? Now at the end of his life, my guess is it would be one that we haven't seen. One with his family and maybe some really awesome piece of technology that has yet to be built but was already in his imagination before he died.

These three people, Debbie Friedman, Fred Shuttlesworth, Steve Jobs, these people are luminaries, famous, earth changing people. They were all full of greatness and passion, they all were very clear about the directions their lives would go, how they should be spending their time. They all changed the world with music, with civil rights, with communications and the way our world looks is better for all of them having been in it. Not a one of them was perfect. Not a one of them didn't have giant gaping holes in their lives that could have used some fixing.

When we talk about Biblical characters in Torah study or during services, I like to try to see the whole person, to mention the flaws along with the greatness. As Jews we do not have saints everyone is fully human. I believe strongly that if we can see the whole story of a great person, it may give us hope and confidence that we too have the potential to change the world, to bring our passions to bear and change things for the better. The

perfecting of our world does not require perfect people and in fact, sometimes the more personally flawed we are the more we are able to achieve for the greater good.

We have the rest of this day lots of time before us to consider our own snapshots. Do we stand at the crossroads of our own lives and do what everyone tells us to do, or do we listen to our hearts and intuition and let our passions lead us to our own moments of greatness?

So, "Here's to the Crazy Ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble-makers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status-quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify, or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world - are the ones who DO!"

I think a little bit, we are all the crazy ones. We certainly all have the potential to change things in big ways or small, to change our own lives, improve the lives of our own families, or even possibly make the world a little better for everyone. This year, may we each find and follow our passion, may we each find a way to improve just one thing in our own lives or in the lives of those around us, and may we all be written in the book of life for a good and healthy new year.