

Kol Nidre -5765
"What's Left Undone"
September 24, 2004

Across the ocean there is a sacred music festival at the end of May every year. For one week you can hear spiritual music from all over the world. Gospel choirs, Berber chants, female Gregorian chants, Jewish-Spanish music from the 14th century. The concert sites themselves are five hundred years old. To catch the festivities, all you have to do is travel to Fez, Morocco.

Even farther away, there is a shrine that is dedicated to the Buddha at Nara, Japan. It holds a statue so huge that it is considered one of the most awe-inspiring wooden structures ever built - the 53 foot Daibutsu Buddha, constructed in 743 CE.

Or if you prefer dance, you can travel to the Cook Islands. There you will see, according to one author, "...the best dancers in the South Pacific" and "the most authentic displays of traditional skills many travelers will ever see." Of course, I would need a map just to find the Cook Islands.

Wait, there's more! The old market at Akko in Northern Israel, ancient harbor to boats for 4,000 years. And don't forget St. Petersburg with its White Nights and Hermitage Museum. And by the way, if you want, you should consider dropping by the Isle of Wight in Merry Olde England or the Cote d'Azur in Southern France.

This is all from this book called, 1,000 Places To See Before You Die, by Patricia Schultz. The book is as thick as my hand and chock full of wonders. If you have time, money and an adventurous spirit, this book is for you.

Of course, there is an irony to the title. Not many of us are going to get to see 100 of these places in our lifetimes. Some of us will barely see 10 or 20. The title is kind of a tease, as if to say: Look what is out there in the great big world. Look how much you will have missed when you die. Look right here at the two paragraphs and the grainy black and white photograph at what you will never see, never hear, never, ever experience.

Schultz writes matter-of-factly about staying at the world's best hotels, like it's something you and I just *have* to do: "Can one even think of visiting London without enjoying high tea at the Ritz? Or when in Singapore, having a Singapore Sling where it originated, at the Raffles Hotel? Isn't Singita safari lodge on the periphery of Kruger National Park as inspirational as the game viewing? And isn't Sweden's Ice Hotel the ultimate hoot?"

I guess so! I know, travel to faraway places is more than restful. It opens us to worlds we only dreamed of . It forces us out of the day-to-day and makes us see the world through new and different eyes. Leaving home and safety opens the possibility of life altering experience.

Recently I traveled to a place where I had a life altering experience. I went to the hospital last month on August 12. Over the next two weeks I was admitted several times.

I share this story tonight because so many of you have asked about me or been surprised to learn I have a problem. I apologize in advance - the point of this sermon is not merely to dwell on my medical condition. But I think you have a right to know what is going on with your senior rabbi and not depend on rumors or hints or chance conversations at Oneg Shabbat.

That night, August 12, I experienced pain unlike any I've ever suffered. I walked out of a class I was teaching and barely made it to my office. Barbara drove me to the hospital. During the long night the ER staff made bets on various diagnoses. But even with all the tests they didn't find what was causing all the pain. Over the next few days they finally discovered the real problem: I have a blood clot in the artery that leads to my spleen. And that is when it got serious.

Blood clots are dangerous things. If one travels to your lung, your heart or your brain, you can simply die on the spot. Mine was in a location so strange many doctors had never seen one there.

I finally went home but went back after a few days because of the pain. This whole time I have so felt cared for by you in the Temple Sinai family and others in the community. I could not have asked for any more love and support than you gave me. I continue to feel your caring deeply, even if I have not been able to personally acknowledge all of your kinds notes and gifts.

The good news is even though I have a clot, it seems that having one by your spleen is less dangerous other places. The less good news is that I take daily medicine to prevent another one from forming. And, because of this, I have to cut back on some activities from which I take pleasure, and some that I frankly took for granted. But given what could have happened, I honestly think that there is no bad news. Every day I thank God and my caregivers that I am basically all right.

But traveling to, through and beyond the hospital has been a life-changing experience. I know this is not new. So many of you have gotten to know the hospital exit on the turnpike better than you ever wanted to.

Lying in bed, I struggled to figure out what I had done wrong, to find myself in the hospital. Pure chutzpah, of course. I wondered about other life mysteries, such as why kosher food in the hospital is so terrible. Slowly, surely, my illusion of control slipped away and I realized that I truly didn't know about what my future held.

You know, in a hospital bed, your mind plays tricks. It asks funny questions. What if I'm not okay? What if I don't make it? What will happen to my family? What have I left undone?

What's left undone? It is the ultimate Kol Nidre question. Tonight we pray to be released from the consequences of some of our promises. But now I believe that is precisely the opposite of what we should want. We should want to be held responsible, to be needed. To be released, to be held free from promise and pledge is to risk never being able to make one again.

Tonight, Kol Nidre, we stand in whiteness. We stand in awe and wonder and amazement, all tinged with just a tiny spot of fear. That is why we wear our tallit, for comfort and protection. It is a garment to pull closer around us and feel even a thin layer of protection from death. Tonight, many wear something white on purpose to remind us of the death shroud that someday will be our only garb.

Tonight, in fear and awe and trembling, each of us asks, what's left undone? Is it something big, like seeing the children through to adulthood? Or maybe it is making sure that our own parents are safe, especially if we live in different cities.

A lot of us believe that what's left undone is to leave enough money for our family for when we are gone. So we buy insurance, we invest in the stock market, we set aside savings. Don't get me wrong. It is vitally important to set aside enough for our families. But if we only concentrate on money, we risk leaving far more vital things undone.

The Talmud teaches that we should attend to this. It asks us to take account of our lives one day before we die. And who, of course, knows when that will be?

And I think that if someone can write a bestseller of the 1,000 places to see before we die, you and I should be able to come up with a list of a few things to attend to before we leave this life. There are so many. Here are just nine of them.

1) We should try to right one old wrong, no matter how ancient it is. I knew an old man once, his name was Larry Muller. He was a very shrewd businessman. He lived in a little town in Wisconsin and in an elegant old house that was almost 100 years old.

When we visited he always received me formally. He dressed in a bow tie and striped suit with suspenders. We would sit on his porch and he would try to teach me, his rabbi, how to read the stock tables in the Wall Street Journal.

One day, he was in the middle of explaining why some company wasn't worth half its listed share price, something about p/e ratios. He interrupted himself and handed me an envelope. He said, "A long time ago, a friend gave me some money to watch for him. I wasn't as careful as I should have been and I made a bad investment and lost his money. He got so angry he never spoke to me again. After a while, I stopped trying to reason with him. But I never made good his money. Here it is, in this envelope." Mr. Muller asked me to give it to that man after his death.

I told him that I respected what he was doing, that he was acting with honor. He looked at me with scorn and said, "I've been thinking about repaying him for 52 years. Honorable would have been not losing his money in the first place. I just can't see dying and having this on my conscience. Make sure he gets it within a week of my funeral."

And I did. I looked at the address on the envelope and saw that the man lived only five miles away. When I gave him the envelope and told him who it was from, he lifted his farm cap and brushed his eyes with his forearm and said, "Well, I'll be damned." I left without saying another word.

Mr. Muller taught me it is not too late to pay our debts. We should not leave them unattended. Writing Mr. Muller's story reminded that as a kid I used to take part in fundraising activities for a whole lot of causes.

The problem is that I rarely, if ever, actually collected and submitted the money. I left it undone for so many years. [So, thank you, Mr. Muller.] This week I am mailing a check to United Way and hope it covers what I didn't turn in over the years, plus interest. But maybe it's not just me. Do you have an old debt to pay? Do you have a wrong to right? Kol Nidre asks that you not leave it undone for yet another year. Who knows when you will no longer be able to attend to it at all?

2) While we are looking at the past, we should try to reconnect with one person from whom we have been distanced. Now, please. I am not saying that we should simply make up with those who have hurt us and never apologized. Some breaks are forever.

But sometimes, when our relationships shatter, they leave jagged edges. We move ever so carefully around them so as not to get cut. Sometimes we bleed anyway. In Hilchot T'shuva, our laws of repentance, we are taught to make three honest attempts to reconnect. If the other person refuses, the sin is on their head. But some effort is required of us.

Years ago my grandfather and my great-uncle fought bitterly over their sister's estate. They died unreconciled to each other. Almost 30 years later, I still sense rifts in my family because of it.

Some of us have suffered breaks in friendship that were like the breaking of an arm that healed badly if at all. What about your family? Do you have former friends? Do you carry the pain of hurts and deep wounds? Tonight, ask yourself, is it worthwhile to try to bind them? If so, maybe you will attend to it this year.

3) We should try to pray one of our regular prayers and hear its words with enough awe and wonder to feel its full power. Back in 1996 I heard the wonderful Cantor Benjie Schiller sing "Mi Chamocha" from

this pulpit. When she sang the line, "Zeh Eli!, This is My God!" I understood the words for the first time in my life, though I had sung it 10,000 times. "Zeh Eli! This is My God!"

And a few weeks ago, my first Shabbat out of the hospital, we were singing Adon Olam at the end of the service. The last line of the song goes, "Adonai Li, v'lo ira, Adonai is my God, I will not fear." And the power hit me right between the eyes. Despite everything, I will not fear. Through tears, it was my first ray of hope since this ordeal started. I urge you: Don't let doubt and skepticism win the day. May the power of prayer find your heart this year. May you not leave it undone by refusing to try.

4) We should try to give away one thing to which we are really, really attached. We should give it to someone who will smile because we did. What would you give away? A book? A coin? A painting? A car? A piece of clothing or furniture?

I believe we face a constant challenge not to be owned by the things we have. Sometimes I think that the story of Frodo and the One Ring is simply a morality tale about the power that things have over us. Find something you love. Give it away. Counterintuitive? Maybe. But I don't think so.

My dear friend Fred Platner, alahv ha-Shalom, gave me an ancient Bible after his death. His daughter said, he wanted you to have it. When I thanked her, she got teary and said, "You don't understand. He wanted you to have it before he died. He wanted to see the smile on your face when you opened it." I wish Fred could see the smile in my face every time I open it.

5) We should travel to see someone we love, a trip not covered by any budget or contingency, a kind of "just do it" trip. I believe that we all have some pilgrimage to make, whether to parents, grandparents, children or friends.

I am struck by how harsh a taskmaster time can be. To manage it we submit to routine which does more than order our days. It casts them in cement. But what if you knew you had only two months to live? Who would you make sure you saw before the end? Now, go visit that person before the end of the year. Try not to let that visit go undone.

6) On a lighter note: We should do one thing that is very, very silly even if it embarrasses us. It won't kill us. Please do not tell me what you choose. And it shouldn't be illegal or dangerous. It should just be completely out of character, as in "I can't believe that Shloimy could ever do such a thing like the SkyCoaster at Kennywood! At his age, can you believe it?" Or, can you believe that Ruthie went to Israel and got up on a camel?" As my beloved Grandma Kestenbaum used to say, "At my age, I can do anything I want. So there!" [Flick thumbnail on upper teeth]

7) We should spend at least one Shabbat with family or friends as it was meant to be celebrated - with food and joy and light and wine and song and awe - as if there was no thing in this world more important. The rewards of Shabbat are simple: Spiritual freedom and intimate connection. The punishment of breaking Shabbat is also very simple: You get to keep on being chained to what you do every other day.

Can you stop for just a day? Not every Shabbat, just one? Can you cease golf? Can you cease the day to day? Just once in your life before you die? Celebrate Shabbat, as Shabbat and not simply a day off? If you don't know how, come here and we'll celebrate Shabbat together. Don't set aside this gift without tasting its sweetness on your lips. Don't leave Shabbat undone before you never have another Shabbat to celebrate.

8) We should try to make one thing grow, even if we have a black thumb. This is a personal deficiency. I have never made something grow. In the past, someone has given me a plant with the following comfort: "Don't worry, you can't really kill this one." They're wrong. Yes, I can. I would love to make a living thing grow before I die, to deem a plant on God's green earth worthy of time, patience, love and watering.

I watch Ben Melnick and Mel Bodek in the back, in the rose garden and they seem like almost magical. They make those roses bloom year after year with their measured doses of love and care and fertilizer. It looks like something not to be left undone, participating in the miracle of creation.

9) We should spend some time, preferably not in a hospital bed, trying to figure out the God thing. Contemplating, that is - who we are in the grand scheme, claiming our unique worth even though we are small people in a very large place. We should take the time to try

to figure out our meaning and essence as people and as Jews. We should share our hopes, doubts, dreams and fears with others, especially our children.

To accomplish this, you don't have to go to Jerusalem, although you can and I think you should. You don't have to come to services, although you can and I think you should. You don't have to learn all of your Hebrew prayers, although you can and I think you should.

You see, the act is not as important as the attempt. Saul Ansky, a Yiddish writer who wrote the famous play, "The Dybbuk," put it this way: "Every spot where we raise our eyes to heaven is a holy of holies. Everyone, having been created by God in the Divine image and likeness is a high priest. Every day of our lives is a Day of Atonement, and every word that we speak with sincerity is the Name of God."

It is in refusing to speak, to wonder, to dream or even raise our eyes that we find hell. This Kol Nidre, try not to leave God undone.

Tonight, let us promise not to leave undone what is in our power to do. Whether we are well or not, fulfill something you have put off this year. Do it to the full. Don't leave it undone.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book, Kitchen Table Wisdom, writes the following about fullness, even when our lives are in danger:

"One of my clients [after a year of chemotherapy] went to San Francisco with her husband to celebrate. Her oncologist had tried to discourage her from this. It had seemed rather pointless to him, as she was still far too weak to see the sights, go to a restaurant or participate in any of the activities of this rich and complex city...He suggested she wait a few months until she was stronger. But she and her husband had gone anyway and stayed in a nice hotel.

Afterwards, I asked her about it. 'It was wonderful,' she said. 'First we ordered room service. They brought it to us on a table with a cloth a half inch thick. My first meal without a tray. It was so elegant, the wine glasses and the butter carved into little flowers. And the food! We sat in this lovely room overlooking a little park and ate real food that I could actually taste...

Then we took long, long hot baths and used up every single towel in the bathroom. Great big thick towels - there were twelve of them. And we used up all those delicious smelling things in the little

bottles. And ate most of what was in the little refrigerator. And sat outside on the terrace in our bathrobes and watched the moon rise over the city. We found all the pillow that they hide in the dresser drawers and slept in this king size bed with eight [of them]. And saw the sunrise. We used it all up. It was glorious!' she said to me, a woman who spend most of her time in a hotel room asleep."

Even weak as a feather, this woman promised not to leave anything undone that was in her power to do. She promised.

That is what tonight is all about. Kol Nidre is about promises. Promise yourself tonight that you will not leave your life undone.

Tonight, we do not ask for much, only for our very lives. "U-va-char-ta ba-chayim. Choose life," our Torah teaches us tomorrow. Choose life so we might complete our tasks in love.

May we not be undone by what we leave undone. *We have so little time.* As the Hebrew poet Bialik wrote, "Alas for those who cannot sing, but die with all their music in them." So sing! Sing! Sing!