

YIZKOR – 5779

How old do you think of yourself as? Health concerns and life experiences can sometimes make us look at ourselves as older or younger than our chronological age. When we have one of these experiences, our whole way of thinking changes. Like the sound of the shofar, we are startled into seeing life and seeing ourselves from a new perspective.

Today, we read the words of the prayerbook. Most of us know what we are going to hear and read, but we may not pay a lot of attention to it until something happens.

Many years ago, I was going thru a situation which caused those same words which I had read year after year to really hit me with extra power. The service that year really got me to thinking about my life. What have I done and what would I do differently? How will I make a better future for my loved ones? How do I want to be remembered?

Maybe you have experienced this in the past and maybe you will in the future. The point, however, is that these are the exact questions we are supposed to confront every year during the High Holy Days.

Rosh Hashana is not just a ritual of food. It is introspection, connecting with the deep questions. One doesn't have to be "religious" to connect. At some point, it will happen to us all.

Planning and vision are really important; a little goes a very long way. Less than a month ago, Aretha Franklin died. Of course, the superlatives could go on without end, but Aretha Franklin died without a will. Not that I expected to be in it, but one can only imagine the turmoil that will result from her not having taken care of this basic planning.

Like many celebrities, many of us regular people die without a will. I have been amazed, over the years, at how many people do not have life insurance, leaving their survivors in a dangerous position.

So, on this day, when we hope to have our names sealed in The Book of Life, let's all make sure that we've taken care of three items, just in case we're not in that book. 1) We should all have cemetery plots picked out and paid for. Whether it is our nearby Temple cemetery or any of dozens more in the metro area or, of course, elsewhere, we should ensure that our mourners do not have to figure out what we wanted or have to make this decision on their own.

2) We should have life insurance for our survivors, unless we know that it is not necessary.

3) We should have a will

Whether we are 30, 60 or 90, planning ahead relieves our loved ones of enormous headaches, not to mention ulcers, agita and more. Of course, we should all live to be 120 and we can all modify any or all of the decisions we make. However, just as an educator or a physician would have a baseline measurement for assessing future progress, we have to have something in place. . . just in case.

Unexpected events occur, whether or not we want them or expect them. No matter how old we get, many of us still hold on to the teenage invincibility complex. Sure, things happen to other people, family, friends, strangers . . . but nothing will happen to me.

This makes as much sense as the people who won't go to a dentist or another doctor for fear of hearing that there is a problem. Makes sense, right? If a doctor doesn't tell me that I have a problem, then I don't really have a problem. If that's the way we think, however . . . we've got a problem!

Whom do we want to benefit with our lives? What are the values that are at the core of our lives? How can we strengthen those values to ensure that they live on after us?

The answer, in a word, is tzedakah. We are all here right now because we value something, someone. We know that the value of Jews coming together to remember our loved ones is sacred. Whether we do it at the four Yizkor services during the year or only on Yom Kippur; whether we are a part of the synagogue that provides these services to the community or we make an annual pit stop, if we care, if we want something or someone to carry on after us, we have to do something.

Whether it is planning for our final resting place, planning for our loved ones welfare once we are gone or ensuring that the Jewish community can carry on our values after we, and perhaps our family, is no longer around, we have to do something.

Far too many synagogues and other Jewish institutions have disappeared in the last decade because people took them for granted. For those of you who are members of Beth Am and especially for those of you who are not, I strongly encourage you not to take us for granted this year.

As we ask to have our names sealed in the Book of Life this year, may we perform the acts that warrant our names being included in that book. May we live our lives so that the people and the places we care about are taken care of, so that they can continue to be here for us and to help us to carry on the values we hold so dear. AMEN