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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
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**Recognizing our Blessings
Yom Kippur – 5775**

As almost everyone here knows, last April I had aortic heart valve replacement surgery. Some people are afraid of surgery. I was not. Aortic valve replacement surgery has a very high success rate. I did not have a heart attack or cardiovascular disease. Other than the bad valve, I am healthy and relatively young. I had no doubt that I would wake up.

Nevertheless, I was grateful when I did. I have only faint and disjointed memories of my time in the recovery room, but I do remember the overwhelming joy I felt when I woke up. I was grateful to my doctors, grateful to my family, and grateful to God that I was alive and had been given the gift of additional years.

Until late February, I did not know that I was born with an abnormal heart valve. I was born with a bicuspid aortic valve which has two leaves instead of the usual three. Bicuspid valves have a tendency to go bad at younger ages than normal heart valves. There was nothing I had done to cause its malfunction or anything I could have done to prevent it. Even today I don't think of myself as having been ill. I think of myself as having had a bad part that needed replacing. Now that it has been replaced, I am as good, or perhaps, better than new. There is nothing I am not allowed to do and I have no restrictions, except that Judy is no longer allowed to disagree with me.

My life today is not substantially different than it was before, and yet it is. I no longer take the blessing of life for granted. I am appreciative for each and every blessing each new day brings.

To begin with, I am grateful for waking up each morning. At one time people thought that their souls were taken from them at night and were returned to them during the day. Every morning we Jews are supposed to say a *bracha*, a blessing when we wake up to acknowledge the blessing of being “re-souled”:

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁהַחַיּוּת בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֶמְוִנְתֶּךָ.

“I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign, for restoring my soul to me in compassion. You are faithful beyond measure.”

This blessing has taken on new meaning for me. Even though my heart is working perfectly, at some level I still worry that I will suffer some catastrophic event that will cause my new valve to fail in the middle of the night. I am still not a morning person, but when I wake up each morning, I am glad I am still here. I am grateful for the new day and the opportunities it brings.

My predecessor, Rabbi Aaron Gold, z”l, used to say that one of the differences between a pessimist and an optimist is how they embrace the new day. The pessimist slowly wakes up, gets out of bed and says, “Good God, it’s morning.” The optimist wakes before his alarm, bounds out of bed and says, “Good God! It’s morning!”

How we feel when waking up can say a lot about we feel about life. One of the signs of depression is excessive sleepiness, a desire to avoid people and to avoid life. If we feel as though we never want to wake up, or see this symptom in a friend, we should seek mental health assistance.

We should never take waking up each morning for granted. Moving from unconsciousness to consciousness is a miracle. Waking up each day is a blessing. Each morning brings new opportunities to put the past behind, to embrace the present,

and plan for the future. Each morning brings new opportunities for fulfillment, joy, and happiness.

Several months after surgery, I no longer worry as much that I won't wake up, but I am still glad when I do.

The second thing I am grateful for is living during a time when medical care has advanced to the point where physicians, pharmaceuticals, and medical devices can prolong our years well beyond historical normal life expectancies. A few years ago I officiated at an unveiling ceremony in one of Los Angeles' oldest Jewish cemeteries. Looking at the grave markers, I was surprised to see that in the early part of the twentieth century, most people lived only between forty and fifty years. Today, based on current actuarial tables, financial planners are urging their 65 year old clients to plan on living another 20 to 30 years or more. In this congregation we have at least four members who are over one-hundred years old, and many more in their nineties, most of whom are fully functioning and vital.

Fifty years ago my bicuspid valve would most likely have killed me. The same goes for innumerable people who, like me, today live normal, active, and meaningful lives because of new treatments and therapies.

Judaism values physicians because of their skill and ability to heal. Ultimately our lives are in God's hands, but God also has given those in the medical field the ability to prolong lives. It is a *mitzvah* to heal. We should never take the miracle of modern medicine for granted.

The third thing I am grateful for is my family. As I recovered in the hospital and then at home, I wondered how people without families make it through stressful and trying times. Who do they have to help and support them physically and emotionally? It's hard enough being dependent on others, without the added burden of those others being strangers.

My children live at a distance, but they all wanted to come to San Diego for my operation. I did not want them to. I knew I would recover and preferred that they visit afterwards. But they called continually for updates and to let me know they were thinking about me and praying for me.

Judy was indispensable. She not only had to help me with my physical needs, such as making sure I was safe in the shower, but also had to put up with my post-operative complaints and *kvetching*. She had to take care of many of my household tasks, like taking out the trash and restocking my beer. Again, I wondered, how do people without families manage to get through difficult situations and crises in their lives?

It's trite, but true. We do take those we love the most for granted. We expect a lot from our family, but don't always show our gratitude or acknowledge their love and care. But when push comes to shove, our family members are the ones who will stand by our side, even during the most challenging times of our lives.

The fourth thing I am grateful for is the impetus to reorder my priorities and distinguish between what is important and what is not. Things that would have one time annoyed me, or I would have obsessed over, roll more quickly off my back. I spend

greater time and attention with those aspects of my life and work that I consider more important.

Our Ritual Vice President, Dr. Michael Mantell wrote a book entitled: “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff. P.S., It’s all small stuff.” (It’s available in our Sisterhood Traditions Gift Shop.) I don’t completely agree with this sentiment. It’s not all small stuff. I do think there are issues we face which are more significant and life changing than others, but I understand what he means. Not everything that seems urgent is an emergency, and not everything that demands our time and attention is worthy or significant. Most of us are experts at making mountains out of molehills, and then complain that they are in our way.

We know what our values and priorities are, yet we act in ways which do not reflect them. We agonize over minutiae and are sidetracked by the inconsequential. Even when there is a clear path before us, we stumble and can’t find our way. We waste minutes, hours, and days, sometimes even a lifetime on trivialities.

Motivational speaker and author Dr. Steven Covey used to tell the following story:

One day an expert was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive home a point, used an illustration the students never forgot.

As this man stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers he said, “Okay, time for a quiz.” He pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar.

When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes." Then he asked, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. He dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks.

He smiled and asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?" By this time the class was onto him. "Probably not," one of them answered. "Good!" he replied. Then he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?"

"No!" the class shouted. Once again he said, "Good!" He grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked up at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?"

One eager student raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how busy you are, you can always do more!"

"No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is: If you begin by filling the jar with pebbles, water, and sand, you'll never be able to fit the big rocks in. All the space will be taken up with the smaller stuff."

Dr. Covey concluded by asking, "What are the big rocks in your life? A project that you want to accomplish? Time with your loved ones? Your faith, your education, your finances? A cause? Teaching or mentoring others? Remember to put these Big Rocks in first or you'll never get them in at all."

Life is too beautiful and wondrous to waste “sweating the small stuff,” spending our time and energy on those things which aggravate us or are trivial. I’m not going to suggest what the “big rocks” of your lives should be. However, I will share with you that as a Rabbi, I have never heard anyone at the end of their life say to me, “I wish I had spent more time at the office.”

Everyone has the right to choose their own priorities, but choosing is the easy part. Once we decide what they are, we need to act upon them and not just pay lip service.

Finally, I am grateful for the blessings of community.

The *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim* is one of the most important in Jewish life. The *midrash* teaches that God believed that *bikur cholim* is so important that God performed it when he visited Abraham as he was healing from his *Brit Milah*, ritual circumcision.

The Talmud teaches

אמר רבי אחא בר חנינא כל המבקר חולה נוטל אחד משישים בצער

“One who visits someone who is ill removes one-sixtieth of their illness.”

Admittedly, I did not want any visitors in the hospital. On the form that asked me what my religion is I wrote, “Vegetarian.” Nor did I want visitors while I was recuperating at home. I am rarely ill and when I am, I become very grouchy and impatient, well...more than I usually am. It was difficult enough for my family to put up with me. I didn’t want to expose anyone else!

Nevertheless, I experienced the healing power of the members of this community who performed the *mitzvah* of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, through the cards, gifts,

letters, and emails I received, and the messages left for me in the synagogue office. I read and treasured each one. I experienced what our sages said about those who visit the ill: they heal them. As I finished each card or email and the good wishes and blessings they contained, I felt a little bit better.

This week I discovered that my experience was not unique. A member of our congregation died after a lengthy illness and I visited her husband before the funeral. One of our Torah School teachers, Lili Feingold, had made her classes' mission writing get well cards to this woman, as well as other Tifereth Israel members who are ill.

Her husband told me how much the cards meant to his wife. They cheered her up and lifted her spirits. He told me that knowing she was in these students' prayers made her pain easier to bear.

The woman wrote beautiful thank you notes to the students and left messages that *Morah* Lili played for them in class. Last Sunday I had the sad task of telling *Morah* Lili's class last that their friend had passed away. But I also told them that the *mitzvah* they performed brightened her life.

I don't know how many times I have said in High Holy Day sermons, "As a religious community we must reach out to those who are ill." This year I experienced that reaching out. This year I experienced the healing power of being a member of a caring community.

Perhaps I received so many cards and emails because I am the rabbi of the congregation and a public figure. I would like to think that is not the case. I would like to think that the members of our community reach out in an equal way, as did *Morah* Lili's Torah School classes, to anyone who is ill, hurting, or in need.

On Yom Kippur we contemplate the fragility of life and our own mortality. I am grateful that last Yom Kippur I was written in the Book of Life, and am here to ponder questions about the meaning and purpose of life once again. This year I hope that I live better answers than I lived before.

I regret that it took a traumatic event for me to better appreciate the blessings that surround me. I hope and pray that you won't take you nearly as long.