

**Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon 5785**  
**Rabbi Arlene Berstein, Cantor Emerita**

**What is the measure of a life?**

If I asked you if you have someone in your life who has inspired you, I bet you would say yes. Some of you would talk about a member of your family. Or maybe a close friend or a mentor. It might be someone you do not know but have read about, perhaps someone from another generation or culture.

In fact, it is impossible to count all these heroes, but when we talk about moments and people of valor, those stories inspire us all to do better—to be better. Their mitzvot and the gifts they gave often live long beyond their time here with us.

Mitzvot, whether large or small, are so important to our daily lives: Honoring parents, visiting the sick, rejoicing with a wedding couple, supporting a friend. Performing acts of loving kindness are a commandment in our tradition. And then there are the mitzvot which can never be repaid, like the accompaniment of the dead to their burial, their final resting place—*Halvayat HaMet*, or turning a shovel of dirt at their gravesite.

There is one mitzvah that hovers over all—***Pikuach Nefesh***—the saving of a life.

This morning, we read in the book of Deuteronomy (30:19): *u'vacharta bachayim*, "Therefore choose life."

If we are able, we must choose life over death.

Sometimes it is not our choice to make. Our brothers and sisters in the land of Israel, for whom we are still mourning, did not have a choice. *Retzach*—murder—*Ra'av*—starvation—there was no choice for them. Our history is full of people who were deprived of the choice for life, but it is also full of stories that show the bravery and strength of others who chose life through great hardship. They are stories that inspire us.

This holy day, I want to tell you about an extraordinary choice that was made by someone I admired and how she chose life even in her death.

While she was a vibrant, joyful woman, full of strength and wisdom, she made a choice for herself and for others that is, I believe, the ultimate *mitzvah*. I am privileged to be related through my cousin to an amazing family—a family that included Rabbi Marcy Gelb Delbick. At the age of 60, she was leading a full life with her husband, sons, her loving parents, five siblings to whom she was close, and an endless number of doting nephews and nieces. She was teaching experiential Judaism through art at summer camp in the east and had so much joy to look forward to even in the midst of a difficult year as a people.

Marcy Gelb Delbick was a multi-talented woman touching Jewish communities throughout the world with an extraordinary soul in her love for her family and for the Jewish people. What she wanted to do in her life was to make a difference in the lives of others...and she was granted so much of that wish.

So, allow me to gather what I know of this special woman, daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunt, friend, artist, lawyer, and Rabbi, and share an important part of her story.

Rabbi Marcy taught in a camp in New England—with deciduous trees filled with green leaves, grassy knolls, a cool lake, perhaps a little too much humidity, and wooden bunks filled with laughing children. Swimming, boating, hiking, arts and crafts and the joyful celebration of Judaism, camp style.

She had had many wonderful days with these children, helping them merge art projects with Jewish values, finding beauty in everything they did with love and encouragement, empowering them to a greater understanding of their Jewish identities through art. Praying with and teaching Torah to the campers, instructing them in art--what a beautiful summer for an artist and Rabbi.

Sadly, and suddenly, this past summer was her last.

Years ago, Marcy made another decision about making a difference in this world. She had chosen to be a designated organ donor. If anything, ever happened to her when she could not choose life for herself, she wanted to be part of life continuing for others. She chose the opportunity to do a unique mitzvah—the highest in our tradition.

The moment had come.

As a Rabbi, Marcy performed the mitzvah of Halvayat Hamet –the accompaniment of the dead for burial for others.

Now, with family beside her, she was accompanied down the long hospital hall to the reading and chanting the beloved Psalms of our tradition—providing her with the opportunity for one more act of kindness.

This accompanied walk was to the transplant operating room—where teams of doctors, nurses, surgeons—waited-- prepared to save or transform 8 lives...

Those teams participated in part of a Jewish ritual—ready to receive and ready to give life—a skill for which they trained for so many years. With loving care and deft expertise, they took her in their arms as they listened to the prayers of her family and fulfilled a last wish in a message that was delivered by a little pink dot on her driver’s license.

There is no doubt that everyone wished skill for those surgical teams, and for each of the strangers whom Marcy was able to help--a complete recovery, good health, and long life.”

***Pikuach Nefesh***—the saving of even one life—is our most important mitzvah—The Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a) teaches, ‘whoever saves a single life is considered by our tradition to have saved the world.’

This year has been a difficult year for so many of us in this space and for those of us online. We have experienced the deaths of parents, children, spouses, family members and friends. Some were anticipated, some were surprises. All of them came with a different type of sorrow.

Judaism has many traditions that help us through these times but not everyone is clear about whether organ donation is or should be part of that.

Sometimes, because of age or illness, it is not an option.

Many years ago, I was a little nervous about putting that pink **dot** designating organ donation on my driver's license. It was the Jewish, the ethical thing to do. It was a step in recognizing my own mortality. But I still had my grandmother's worry, in the back of my mind. I could remember when she told me she was afraid to have a mastectomy. What are you worried about, Bubbie?

I am worried that I need all my parts to be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

No, do not worry, I whispered—you only need the bones! I was referring to the Biblical story of the Valley of the Dry Bones and the words of the Prophet Ezekiel – she smiled, remembering the text, and said—OK, I am keeping all of those.

I had just enough wisdom then to help her in the moment but not enough to know that if someone needed a bone to save a life, then that would be OK too.

When I was thinking about talking to you today about this mitzvah, about the extraordinary generosity of Rabbi Marcy and all the lives she made possible, I spoke to a friend, a surgeon, Dr. Randy Schaffer, whose life's work is transplant surgery. He told me that a surgery like that is a humbling experience.

Dr. Schaffer said “When preparing to start an organ recovery surgery, the entire Operating Room team always pauses to hear about the donor—usually words of remembrance provided by the donor's loved ones—followed by a moment of silence to honor their lifesaving gift. It is a reminder that the work we do is a blessing, that comes out of sacrifice and loss.”

He went on: “In the hospital, we call what this family experienced an “honor walk,” and everyone in the hospital who is able is encouraged to participate and pay respects to the donor, the family, and their life-saving gift.”

How beautiful that religion and science come together in such a remarkable act.

## **What is the measure of a life?**

The measure is not in time, but rather it is in the courage to use body and soul to make a difference—to be purposefully transformational, for as long as we are able, knowing that we will each live on in others because of the mitzvot we have performed and the choices we each have made.

I wish each of you this Year of 5785, good health, long life and from out of the depths of your sorrows--vision, and hope for tomorrow.

*G'mar Chatimah Tovah*