

# If I Only Knew/Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5777

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Let me hazard a guess that most of you did not come into this sanctuary bound and determined to repent for your sins. Even when change is glaringly necessary, even when some deed or some relationship gnaws at you, and no pill, no therapy, no pang of guilt has reduced the urgency, lots of congregants, here and elsewhere, simply will not commit themselves to the process proscribed on these holy days to effect meaningful change in their life.

And yet, you know, you do know that you have changed. You are not the person you once were. The process of growth and change is not the same for everybody, but every single one of us has been the victim and the beneficiary of stunning events.

Stunning events change you. Forever.

Let me give you a couple of out-of-the-box examples. First from the world of sports, from New York Yankee history in fact. Twenty years ago a twelve-year-old got the chance to attend Game One of the 1996 American League Championship Series, Yankees vs. Orioles. Bottom of the eighth inning, Yankee rookie shortstop, believe it or not, Derek Jeter, drove a fast ball deep to right field outfielder Tony Tarasco, leaped, put

his glove up to try and catch the ball. At that moment so did a young fan, Jeffrey Maier, preventing Tarasco from making the catch. Maier wound up at the bottom of a large pile of the fans fighting for the ball. He didn't get the prize souvenir but he instantly became a hero among Yankee fans and a villain in Baltimore.

A couple of years ago he wrote an article entitled, *How Derek Jeter's Homerun Changed My Life Forever.*

Look what happened in the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah on top of Mount Moriah. Abraham almost follows fairly standard Middle Eastern practice by sacrificing his son to appease his God. Through that harrowing journey, he found out that his God and his faith do not require a choice between loving the creator and the created. Loving God precisely means loving our children even more fiercely.

According to the Torah and Midrash, Abraham was never the same. He returns to Beersheba, the city to which he expelled his first son. The Torah clearly suggesting that Abraham wanted to be a father again to both of his children, Isaac and the expelled Ishmael. He deeply mourns for his wife, Sarah, tacitly acknowledging that his ego had been much too outsized to make her a true partner in life and vows to be a better husband and father when he starts a new family a few chapters later.

A personal example: We have family friends, the Barons, so close we called them Aunt Evey and Uncle Sid growing up. Their fourth child, Bruce, was born with Downs Syndrome. He was an incredibly loving and caring human being with the warmest heart and a never-absent smile. I had the honor of officiating at his Bar Mitzvah and close to

twenty years later the painful duty of officiating at his funeral. His family decided to donate his organs so that others might live. A recipient of his liver, Dr. Tom Dempsey had his life saved by their selfless mitzvah. He wrote the following to the family:

*I so often feel unworthy, guilty for I have attained life from death, to have gained so very much from your enormous loss. And I picture your smile, reassuring me that you are pleased that part of your beloved Bruce has come to rest within me. I look at my children, who literally just stare and think, were it not for your selflessness they would not exist. Because I would not be here. But I am here and I try never to take that for granted. The feelings of unworthiness convert to a motivation to help others, to live that precious gift of life to its fullest.*

*I was fortunate enough to diagnose, against the opinions of three other medical specialists, a man's active brain infection, which if not stopped in its tracks immediately would have caused his death. He had called me days later and interrupted me in the exam room to thank me. And his voice cracked when he said, "You saved my life. Thank you. Thank you." At that moment I thought of you and I thought of Bruce. If you had to lose your son, if you had to suffer that pain, I was so very proud to have brought someone else back to the world in his name and in yours.*

Amazing! So, we change perspective, worldview, not usually because of intense self-analysis or spiritual enlightenment, but because life jolts us at one point or another.

Then we see what we could not see, we know what we could not know, perhaps knowing what we wished we did not have to know.

We profoundly change when we know that our parent has some form of dementia and will never be the same.

When the CAT scan reveals that your abdominal pain is caused by a tumor and you enter that heavily populated world of those seeking lifesaving cancer treatment.

Your mate blindsides you, announcing that he/she does not want to be married to you anymore. You have to learn to go on, after feeling like you have suffered an amputation.

Your child is diagnosed as bi-polar and your obsession changes from “Will they be able to get into the best schools in the land” to “Will their medication and therapy keep my precious child from sinking into a black hole too deep for anyone or anything to reach down and bring them back to the surface?” Will I ever see her beautiful smile again?

We change, almost always that is.

A story was filed in Skokie, Illinois that at 7:52 one night according to local reports a Jewish lady named Laura Becker ordered directly from the menu without asking for any changes from the waitress. We have not been able to independently verify the claims but if confirmed this will represent the first case in documented history of a Jewish person ordering a meal at a restaurant without making any special requests.

“I simply do not know what to do” said the waitress Susan Jones. She said, “I would like the tuna on rye please and then handed me back the menu. I just kept waiting but she didn’t say anything. No can you hold the lettuce; no can I substitute the Cole slaw for pickles, nothing! It was surreal” said a clearly shaken Jones.

If confirmed, the effect of the incident will have enormous impact on the gastronomical identity of Jews around the world. Particularly if they did not complain about their table location.

Most of life does present us with profound transitions. We can be absolutely astounded each time we bring a child into our family. Or a grandchild. We love in a way never thought possible. When we see them on the bimah for their B’nai Mitzvah or under the *chuppah*, we are stunned by the emotions these brilliant ceremonies engender. Stunned by the people, the *mentschen* they have become.

And of course we learn so much when we really confront mortality. I learned something profound after the death of each of my parents. I loved my father for his kindness, his great sense of humor. If you’re not particularly thrilled with mine, blame him. But I often wondered why did a man with all his smarts and abilities spend his life behind the grocery counter?

Years later I came to really understand that after World War II he came home to help his dad with his struggling grocery business. Honor your father and mother meant true self-sacrifice and doing his duty which my father clearly understood.

I loved my mom for giving me life and strength, for helping me overcome my childhood disability. For teaching me resilience she sunk into a depression following her breast cancer surgery. Now, I think about her courage and nobility at her moment of death. I'm not sure she wanted to ease her own pain as much as to ease ours, not wanting us to see her constant agony. Her last phone calls were to adoring family comforting them about her impending death.

Our parents continue to teach us all their lives and well beyond.

And we grow and we change. The Torah models this brilliantly in the evolving character of the patriarch Jacob whose name was changed to Yisrael—we, of course, are B'nai Yisrael, the children of Israel. His journey is a paradigm for ours.

Jacob's profile is fascinating and all too familiar. We all know people whose desire for success means they'll do anything to get ahead. That was Jacob, gaining great riches, a huge family, but he is strangely discontented. The night before he is to meet the brother he cheated, he has a sleepless night and wrestles with an *Ish*. On that sleepless night he acquires a new name, *Yisrael* and regains some of his lost integrity. Torah teaches that the process of clawing our way forward, we sometimes too lose our way and forget who we intended to be. It is never too late to get our good name back. It is never too late.

We have all lived a life. Don't you wish that you could know back then all that you know now? So let's fantasize for a moment that this generation, our children, would sit at our feet and take in our wisdom as if we were the wise oracle. "Tell us, oh parents, what you have learned from a lifetime of abundant blessing and stinging loses." (I told you it was a fantasy, but let's go with it.)

But, in fact, you could articulate what life has taught you. You could send them an e-mail, a text, a letter even and say something like this: "For what it is worth, this is what life has taught me: When you were first born, I was actually intimidated. I didn't know how to hold you, didn't want to drop you. Your first crying jag filled me with a deep sense of inadequacy. But as you looked into my eyes, I was a 'goner.' I loved you in a way I never dreamed possible. I thought you were perfect.

I still do. When I talk to our friends about you, you become the most gifted child on the face of the earth. We Manhattan parents are guilty of over-inflating our kid's accomplishments and potential. We both know you have had many struggles to deal with and these have taken a toll on your self-esteem. I know you feel you have not measured up to your own expectations and you feel you have disappointed us. I won't deny you those feelings.

But, I want you to know, my child, that I so respect you—not for your balance sheet of accomplishments and successes. I love you for your character, your inner strength, your capacity to love and all you have done for us, your parents.

Know this: You will achieve great success, but you will also shoulder real pain, failure and loss. Like Jacob, you may limp away but you will learn from your pain and be better for it.

The story actually was told to me and it is only slightly changed. Years ago, at a frat party, it was my first week on campus, I had a couple of beers and I locked eyes with an upper classmate. He sauntered over and the next thing I know we were upstairs and he was on top of me. I tried to push him off, I know I did, but he wouldn't move, he just wouldn't move.

I woke up hours later a mess. I was just in a daze. Not only did not report the rape, I told no one, not my roommate, not my friends. I really withdrew from everything. I was filled with such shame. Who would believe me?

And of course, I was scared to tell my parents. They sacrificed everything to send me to college, debt free. And they had such confidence in me and this is how I paid them back.

It gets worse. It turns out I was pregnant and panicked. I didn't know what to do and thought of trying to induce an abortion myself. At 3 o'clock in the morning I called my best friend from high school and told her everything, just vomited it all out. She was on the next plane and together we went to campus health services and they were so caring. It took me many months to tell my parents and they were amazing.

I'm not sure that was the only reason there was so much tension in our home growing up. I do blame myself for not being able to trust your father. Through years of therapy I've learned just how special he really is. Please forgive me for being so distant for too many years.

What I'm trying to say, my dears, is that your parents should not be put on a lofty pedestal. They are oh-so human. You too will make mistakes, maybe serious ones. I hope you know there are people you can count on. I hope you will trust us to be there for you no matter what.

So my children, you need to know that God has given us many blessings but none more incredible than you. I'm so proud of how you picked yourself up after your failures. I'm proud that you continue to battle your demons every day. I am proud of you not just because of your performance, but because of your resilience.

Social media is wonderful in so many ways, and yet it is destructive in others. You see all those people online who project perfection and make us think that we will never measure up. Anna Quinlan has written something worth hearing:

All those years as a woman hearing not thin enough.

Not pretty enough.

Not smart enough.

Not this enough, not that enough.

I woke up one morning and thought, “I am enough.”

You are enough! So much more than enough! I pray that one day you will come to know that.

One more thing:

You were put on this earth also to make a difference in the life of someone else. When you find your purpose, give of your gifts generously.

Bryan Stevenson has written a remarkable book, *Just Mercy*, about the sorry state of justice in our country. ףדדד ךדד ךדד *Justice, justice, you shall pursue* teaches our Torah. Certainly we are not there yet. Far from it. And if you are an African-American in the United States of America, you have known this for a very long time.

In the book Bryan met a woman sitting in the courthouse hallway:

“My sixteen-year-old grandson was murdered fifteen years ago,” she said, “and I loved that boy more than life itself. The judge sent his killers away to prison forever. I thought it would make me feel better but it actually made me feel worse.

I didn’t know what to do with myself after those trials, so about a year later I started coming down here. I don’t really know why. I guess I just felt like maybe I could be someone, you know, that somebody hurting could lean on.

It has been wonderful, Bryan. When I first came, I’d look for people who had lost someone to murder or some violent crime. Then it got to the point where some of the folk grieving the most were the ones whose children or parents were on trial, so I just started letting anybody lean on me who needed it. Some of those judges throwing people away like they’re not even human. A lot of pain. I decided that I was supposed to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at each other.”

Bryan Stevenson.

My children, a lot of stones get thrown at each other, some come from our lips, some from our actions, our selfishness, our silences, our exclusion of others. And they can really hurt. Be a stone-catcher, and know how good it feels to bring solace to a hurting soul. Do for someone else and you very well may realize why God put you on the earth in the first place. There is a name for what I hope my life stands for: I am Israel, partners with God in trying to make a difference in this world. I wear the name Yisrael proudly and I hope you will too.

And I pray that you will not be stubborn as I was to look inside, to make the changes necessary, to trust those you love, to be proud of yourself again. Thank you my children for hearing me out.

I wish you a *Shanah Tovah*, a good year and a good change.

Amen.