

# Saving a Life

*G'mar Hatima Tova.* It is so wonderful to see each and every one of you on the holiest day of the year. For those I have not yet had the chance to meet in person, I look forward to getting to know each of you and learning your stories over the course of 5783.

Many of us have heard the Talmudic dictum “whoever saves a life, it is considered as if s/he saved an entire world.”<sup>1</sup> What does this mean in practicality? Is it only physical life or does it also have a place in the spiritual realm? I always admired my dad who as a physician saves lives. I have often thought what do I do-save souls?

Saving a life is considered of the highest priority in Judaism. *Pikuah Nefesh*, the Hebrew term for saving a life is so important that it supersedes Shabbat observance.<sup>2</sup> We will examine *Pikuah Nefesh* and how it relates to us and antisemitism. Then, as we prepare to say the Yizkor prayer, we will take a closer look at how our actions today can impact the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:1

<sup>2</sup> See Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 121b

One of the most overlooked fighters to save lives during the Holocaust was a man named Peter Bergson.<sup>3</sup> Formerly named Hillel Kook, the nephew of Rav Kook, he acted to try to persuade the United States to save Jews. His nemesis was Stephen S. Wise, about whom I wrote my undergraduate thesis.<sup>4</sup> Wise, as head of the American Jewish Congress, wanted to tread lightly with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Raise your hand if you saw any part of the Ken Burns series on the Holocaust. If so, you might have seen a different view of Roosevelt than that to which we are accustomed. Bergson began doing mass rallies, pageants, and concerts to draw attention in the United States of the atrocities occurring in Europe. One of the most famous was musician Ben Hecht's pageant "We Will Never Die" with 40,000 people filling Madison Square Garden.<sup>5</sup> Slogans, such as "Action-Not Pity, Can Save Millions Now!" and a full-page ad in the Washington Post with steps to save Jews in Europe were some of Bergson's many techniques.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Special thanks to Rabbi Dov Peretz-Elkins for introducing me to Bergson with his new book Peter Bergson-The Jewish Lobbyist Who Advocated to Save Jews During the Holocaust (Mazo Publishers, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> "From Pacifist to Interventionist: Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and World War I," University of Wisconsin Undergraduate Thesis, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Elkins, pg. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 45.

Was Bergson ultimately successful? One could argue not-the United States had the opportunity to bomb Auschwitz and chose not to.

Roosevelt did not relax quotas on Jews allowed to enter the United States. Yet by bringing world attention to this attempted genocide, his followers and he certainly saved lives. Bergson made the argument “remember, Americans, this is not a Jewish problem. It is a human problem.”<sup>7</sup>

We need to be especially mindful of this now, as last week for the third time in a month we saw an antisemitic swastika at our local campus, Sacramento State.<sup>8</sup> We also saw a swastika shaped trench saying F Jew on the Cherry Bach Golf Course outside Sacramento.<sup>9</sup> This past summer there were antisemitic flyers distributed in Carmichael<sup>10</sup> and antisemitic banners on the UC Davis campus.<sup>11</sup> Such acts cannot be condoned and **must** be responded to strongly. The Holocaust teaches us that appeasement does not work, that as Deborah Lipstadt said, we need

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 47.

<sup>8</sup> [Sacramento State finds another swastika on campus | The Sacramento Bee \(sacbee.com\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Sacramento police tight-lipped after Swastika trench dug at golf course – J. \(jweekly.com\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Antisemitic leaflets in plastic bags left in Carmichael neighborhood \(yahoo.com\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Antisemitic banners at UC Davis prompt campus police probe - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#)

to stop this “normalization of hatred” and recognize that “nothing is solved by silence.”<sup>12</sup> Actions speak louder than words, and we **must** respond effectively to stop this human problem.

Every Yom Kippur, we rehearse our deaths. We refrain from eating and drinking, washing ourselves and having sexual relations, so we can be like the angels, who need none of these physical comforts. Whether we are comfortable with rehearsing our deaths or not, the purpose of this is to prepare us for tomorrow and for days to come. We want to make the most of this one, precious life<sup>13</sup> we have been given to make a difference in this world. We **must** speak and act against injustices such as antisemitism so that when we meet God, we will be able to say that we acted as a force for good against those who seek to harm us. We never know the impact our actions or our words can make.

This brings me back to my opening question-how does one save a life? Some of us are doctors who have performed emergency c-sections or surgeries that have saved lives. Others are psychologists or social

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<sup>12</sup> Deborah Lipstadt talk to American Rabbis September 30, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Reference to a Mary Oliver poem

workers who have saved lives by talking people off the ledge, away from suicide or opioids. There is a metaphorical meaning to saving a life as well. We never know the impact or importance of our simply being present, giving an encouraging hug or a listening ear. Similarly, we do not know what we say that will impact someone who is troubled or going through a stressful time. These are opportunities to save lives (or if you prefer to transform lives) which are crucial.

Today we are reciting Yizkor for loved ones who have, to quote my grandmother, become eternal. I used to think that was an absurd phrase; now I understand its meaning and value. Our tradition teaches us that while our body arrives at a final resting place, our soul, that which is unique and an essential part of us, continues to make an impact in the world. If we believe that life has a purpose, we have greater power than we might have imagined. We never know when we are a *malakh*, an angel there for a godly purpose, to make a difference in others' lives-in the right place at the right time.

Yizkor is all about remembering how fragile life is. We might not need that reminder after the past 2.5 years of COVID. There is likely not anyone in this room who has not been touched by COVID. As we learn in a Mishnah near the end of Tractate Yoma, מיתה ויה"כ מכפרין על התשובה, “Death and Yom Kippur atone through returning to God.”<sup>14</sup> Whether we leave this physical world or spiritually practice leaving this world, either way we are returning to, our Source, the Holy One. The *viddui*, or confessional that we recite on Yom Kippur-and which Sephardim recite every weekday-also parallels the confessional prayer recited before death. Luckily, however, we are granted another chance the day after Yom Kippur and in the days to follow. Our actions matter, and we can make the choice to be better people, the best versions of ourselves.

Think about the loved ones we are remembering this year at Yizkor. What are we doing to act in a way that is aligned with their values so that this day is **not** a day of rote performance? How are we going to realign ourselves and our actions so that for days to come we can **be** the best version of ourselves? How are we going to remember our

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<sup>14</sup> Mishnah Yoma 8:8

loved ones, all the sacrifices they made for us to have better lives? How will we choose to live in a way that they will be proud of us? What bad habits and actions have we undertaken that we want to avoid doing in the future?

There is a poem called “Niggun Hadash” that I read in Hebrew class at the University of Wisconsin. To summarize it, everyone shuffled out of shul after the blowing of the shofar ending Yom Kippur, leaving a poor father and a son who had nowhere to go to break the fast. The synagogue members were so quick to ‘get back to life’ that they overlooked what Yom Kippur is all about: caring for those most vulnerable in their community. They missed Isaiah’s dictum “Is this the fast that I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies...No, **this** is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness...to let the oppressed go free...It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to ignore your own kin.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

Every moment, even now, when we are in prayer before the Holy One, is an opportunity to connect with those around us. We never know the difference a simple smile, a pat on the back, a word of comfort can make in someone else's life. That is why in addition to saying the confessional prayers, I like to recite Rabbi Avi Weiss' *Ahavnu*, an alphabetic acrostic pointing out all the wonderful things that we are doing. Rabbi Weiss mentions that the Ashmanu is written in a major tone, very unusual for a somber prayer, and so he wrote this beautiful, positive version. As we recite it, let us remember our loved ones who passed away before our time and think of all the wonderful things in life that we are doing to make them proud of us. Cantor Rosner will read each word in Hebrew and then I will read Rabbi Avi Weiss' English translation.

אָהַבְנוּ, בְּרַכְנוּ, גָּדַלְנוּ, דִּבְרַנּוּ יְפִי

We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively.

הִעָלִינוּ, וְחִסָּנוּ, זָרָנוּ

We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically,

חַמְלָנוּ, טַפְחָנוּ אֵמֶת

We have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth,

יַעֲצָנוּ טוֹב, כִּבְדָנוּ, לְמַדְנוּ, מָחֵלְנוּ

We have given good advice, we have respected, we have learned, we have forgiven,

נַחֲמָנוּ, סָלְלָנוּ, עוֹרְרָנוּ

We have comforted, we have been creative, we have stirred,

פָּעַלְנוּ, צָדִיקָנוּ, קוֹיָנוּ לְאַרְץ

We have been spiritual activists, we have been just, we have longed for Israel,

רַחֲמָנוּ, שָׂקֵדְנוּ

We have been merciful, we have given full effort,

תָּמְכָנוּ, תָּרַמְנוּ, תִּקְנָנוּ

We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.<sup>16</sup>

Before we continue with Yizkor, I am going to read my grandmother's poem "Voicing the Mourners Kaddish for My Mother's Yahrzeit." *They are only words-I know.*

*How, then, can it be such pain*

*To say them?*

*Is it that I would roll the snow*

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<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Avi Weiss, "Ahavnu," [Ahavnu, beirachnu: Yom Kippur is also a time to confess our good | Avi Weiss | The Blogs \(timesofisrael.com\)](http://www.timesofisrael.com/ahavnu-beirachnu-yom-kippur-is-also-a-time-to-confess-our-good-avi-weiss/)

*Back from your whitesmooth winter grave*

*As coverlet-and see your face,*

*Your form once more before me.*

*They are only words to say.*

*How, then, can it be such pain*

*To say them-can it be the way*

*I take spring's flowers out to you*

*When I would give them to your hand.*

*Though they are only words to say,*

*These words became such pain to say*

*Because I would have you alive!*

*And yet, I speak the words each year.*

*With tears, I tremble and repeat*

*The Kaddish-for within that prayer*

*The best and fullest which was you,*

*Your dreams and your ideals*

*Survive.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lucille Frenkel, "Voicing The Mourners Kaddish for My Mother's Yahrzeit," in *A Jewish Adventure* (Milwaukee, WI: The Eternity Press, 1983), pg. 120.