

Yom Kippur Sermon 2025
Honoring Our Roots
By Rabbi Judy Kummer

We start with a little silliness:

You know the story about the rabbi who, in the middle of his Yizkor sermon on Yom Kippur, pounds on the table and says, “wake up to the fact that every person in this congregation, myself included, is going to die!”

As he expected, everyone is suddenly very alarmed – except for one man in the third row whose face breaks into a broad smile.

The rabbi is shocked. He points to the man and says, “so why are you so amused? Aren’t you afraid?”

The man shrugs his shoulders and answers, “well, I’m not from this congregation. I’m just here visiting my sister!”

My friends,

I’d like to talk to you today about a wide range of topics: about gardening, genealogical research, the *musaf* additional service — and even about fish. (Fish?!)

So first, about roots: as a devoted gardener, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about roots. While I really enjoy planting and harvesting, I also enjoy digging—digging up roots, in order to dig out weeds, and digging things up that are overgrown that need to be divided and transplanted. There’s something amazing about turning up all of that soil and seeing what lives beneath it— all that richness, all those little microbes and creatures, along with all the vegetation.

As human beings, we too have roots. Our roots may be our own personal memories, going back as far as we can remember in our lifetimes. Our roots may be our family histories, going generations deep into the past. They may be our people's roots, going even deeper into the past. They may be human roots going even deeper, even further back.

Many of us have been cut off from our roots by migration, by the Holocaust. Lots of people these days have signed up for ancestry.com, finding relatives that we never knew we had. My brother has been doing genealogical research, and it has been exciting to uncover new older generations in the family history. Our roots are really important in life!

As a gardener, I am well aware of the need to cultivate roots and take good care of them. You need to make sure that they have rich soil to live in, with lots of healthy microbes, which is one of many reasons that I really love to compost and add vital nutrients back into the soil in my garden. Roots need healthy air and water, as well as the right soil and light.

This year, I tried to grow sunflowers. I tucked the contents of a packet of sunflower seeds into the back edges of all the planters in my garden, but either the seeds didn't sprout, or they sprouted and some obnoxious little critter in my garden nibbled them back—each and every one of them. Then I tried starting sunflower seeds in a separate planter, delighting as I always do in seeing the sprouting seeds raise their little green leafy heads above the soil. I transplanted the delicate seedlings, lifting them out carefully with a spoon and settling them in their new settings in my planters — but they didn't survive. It seems that they are finicky about not having their roots be disturbed. I guess I wasn't taking good enough care of their roots.

So how do we take good care of our roots, those roots that help us as human beings to stay grounded in our lives and in the world?

One way we tend to our roots is by remembering, by honoring the memories of loved ones we've lost, as we will do shortly with our *Yizkor* service. We will remember them at least by name and by relationship to us, and, says our text, we can commit to giving *tzedakah*, charitable contributions, and by acting charitably in their name.

So it's important that we remember; that is clearly a first way of tending to our roots. We tell the stories about the lives of those we've loved: funny stories and sad stories, stories about what was important to them and what was remarkable about them -- and even perhaps some of what was not so remarkable, even what was ordinary about them. At a funeral service and in the *El maleh rachamim* prayer we will say toward the end of *Yizkor*, we ask that God "bind this person's soul up in the bond of eternal life;" we sometimes see this inscribed on tombstones with the letters *taf, nun, tzadi, bet, hay*— representing the phrase "*t'hay nishmato (or nishmatah for a woman) tzrurah b'tzror hachaim*, may this person's soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life." Now, in truth, I'm not entirely sure what the "bond of eternal life" actually is, but I do think that when we tell the stories of our loved ones' lives, and when we keep their memories alive among the living, that is a powerful way of binding someone in the bond of life, among the living. Keeping someone's memory alive among the living is a way of offering that person a form of life after death, and it allows us to tend to our roots with the stories we will tell.

Another way of honoring our roots, of remembering, is by taking action. As we work to make the world a better place and do so in the name of remembering individuals from the past, we are keeping their values alive. It may have been important to our

loved ones to tend to the family, or to help people less fortunate, or to resettle immigrant families, or to preserve the natural world. What are some of the things that were important to your loved ones, and how can you follow in their footsteps? Taking action like this can be another powerful way of honoring our roots.

But besides helping others, we also need to take care of our own souls. This is another way of tending to our roots; we are tending to the root of our own being, the *neshamah*, the soul.

Our High Holiday services can give us a lot of guidance in the ways we can tend to our souls. I have to tell you that a lot of the prayers that are the most meaningful are found during the *musaf* additional service, when — I'm sad to say — many people who are here at our service today will already have left — unless I persuade you otherwise. 😊 Our cantor and I discussed over and over the option of moving our *Yizkor* service to be *after* the 20 or 30 minutes of brief but very meaningful *musaf* prayers -- but I didn't want anyone here to feel like we were holding you hostage.

So I'd like to tell you about some of the prayers that I think of as *the most meaningful* of our High Holiday season — — and then if you are inclined to remain here following *Yizkor* and join us while we offer those prayers, you are welcome to do so. I invite you to tend to your soul in this way!

We come first to the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer, which many scholars say is the most important prayer in all of our High Holiday liturgy. The *Unetaneh tokef* prayer declares how awesome and inspiring this Yom Kippur day is. The liturgy describes this awe-inspiring moment: “the great shofar is sounded; the still small voice is heard. Even the angels are dismayed; in fear and trembling they cry out, ‘the day of judgment has arrived!’ For even the angels may not be without fault. On this day we all pass before You,

God, one by one, like a flock of sheep. As a shepherd counts his sheep, making each of them pass under his staff, so, God, do You review every living being, measuring the years and decreeing the destiny of every creature.”

Our very fates are hanging in the balance, says this prayer— and it reminds us that as a result of this review and judgement of our actions, our very existence may come to an end. Fear and trembling are pretty appropriate responses to a warning like that!

Now, there is no doubt that many people here will be saying to themselves, “angels? God sitting on high and judging? But I don’t believe in God, at least not when it comes to a picture like this.... A prayer like this can’t have anything to do with me; it certainly isn’t relevant for me.”

So what are we to do with this theology? For some of us, thinking of God as an all-powerful being who is judging us and dictating our fates – and judges not only us but even the angels – is theology that works for us. In this case, how wonderful!

For those Jews who find this theology challenging, we acknowledge both here and in the next prayers, the *B’rosh hashana* and Great *Alaynu* prayers, that no matter how much we wish we were in control in life, we are not. Whether or not there is some divine hand at work, reviewing our deeds and decreeing our fates and determining any of the many different ways that our lives may come to an end, the reality is that our lives *will end*. And we human beings are powerless in facing our mortality. For many of us, that is a pretty scary reality to face; we may avoid this reality of our mortality for most of the year (avoidance is, after all, a very powerful coping mechanism), but our tradition encourages us to look boldly at the fact of our mortality during this brief High Holiday season. We take that sobering fact and that fear of our

mortality, and we hold it in our hearts. We don't shy away; we acknowledge our fears and our powerlessness. Sobering indeed.

But, says our *Uteshuva* prayer that follows, there is a *nechemta*, a consolation; there are areas in life that we can have some impact on. While we may not have control over the *quantity* of days we will live, we do have some say about the *quality* of the life that we live. The text of this brief 7- word prayer reads “*Uteshuva utefila utzedaka ma'avirin et ro'ah ha-g'zayra*—but repentance, prayer and deeds of kindness can lessen the severity of the decree.” Whether or not we believe in the literalness of this decree, that our fates have been assigned in advance, we can have some input into the quality of our days, even if not the quantity of them.

So what are these 3 words, these 3 concepts, *teshuva*, *tefilla* and *tzedakah*, all about?

We can choose to do *teshuvah*, being reflective and aware of the impact of our actions in life and on the people around us, and repenting if we need to. We can rectify what we've done wrong; we can make amends where we have fallen short in our behavior in the past year.

UTefila, we can be introspective, we can engage in the hard work of tending to our souls on a regular basis. We can offer regular prayers, we can commune with the Divine or work to keep up a practice of meditation or journaling or art or yoga or mindfulness. We can tend to our souls.

Utzedaka, we can give charitable contributions, and in fact we can **be** *tzedaka*, acting with kindness and compassion, and bringing more *tzedek* or justice —the root of *tzedaka*— into the world. This is another way of tending to the core of our being, the soul.

Tucked into *musaf* on Yom Kippur, we find the *Avodah* service, reminding us that when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it was the focus for our Israelite ancestors; their worship at the Temple in Jerusalem was their way of making a connection with God, the Source of all Life. Our Israelite ancestors would come on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem at least 3 times each year to give thanks for the abundance they enjoyed in life and to offer heartfelt prayers that they would not experience adversity. And they would gather at the Temple on this one day each year, on Yom Kippur, to see the high priest, scrubbed clean and wearing special white garments, setting aside the two goats we read about in the Torah service, the goat designated as the sacrificial offering and the scapegoat, which they hoped would carry away the Israelites' sins. With great drama, the high priest would then enter the Holy of Holies, purify the space and then pronounce the unpronounceable name of God—and at the end of this ceremony, the Israelites would be forgiven their sins.

Today we don't offer sacrifices -- and we will not be bringing a live goat into our services -- but we mark this remembering of the *avodah* service figuratively with a few moments of guided quiet contemplation, a brief space for silence and stillness in the middle of an otherwise word-filled day.

Traditionally in *musaf*, we recite the “*shema kolaynu*” prayer, imploring God to hear our voices and to be kind and compassionate with us in considering our fates. These five lines of liturgy include the powerful and poignant plea, “do not cast us off in old age; when our strength declines, do not forsake us”—which is one impetus for my life's work in geriatric chaplaincy.

We join our voices in singing the “*kee anu amecha*” prayer, noting the many metaphors we can use in describing the relationship

between us and the Divine, and expressing the heartfelt wish that that relationship be a reminder to the Source of Life that we need to be cared for with love and with compassion.

We recite the confessionals of our sins – – the *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet* prayers— acknowledging our collective responsibility for the shortcomings of members of our community. Eventually we will come to the threefold priestly blessing, where we will place our hands on each other's heads and receive our Jewish people's blessing, handed down with love over the course of hundreds of generations.

And we end our service with a rousing rendition of “*hayom t'amtzaynu*, today, please God, give us strength” – and we can giggle at the thought of asking for strength to survive not just a life filled with trials and tribulations, but also a long day of services!

Our day together is long, and it is perhaps a pity that some of the most important and beautiful and meaningful prayers come towards the end of our morning service. For those whose practice is to leave immediately following the *Yizkor* service, I invite you to try something different this year: consider staying beyond the end of our *yizkor* prayers —and see if you find something at all moving in what you will experience. You are welcome to join us as we will be tending to our roots, to our souls, together.

So now, as I promised, we come to the fish. What on earth do fish have to do with tending our roots, or perhaps with tending to our souls?

I have learned recently about the lifecycle of salmon. (This is actually related to our topic, even though it might not seem to be at first glance.)

I've learned from a friend in the Pacific Northwest that salmon are born or hatched in the shallows of rivers upstream. As beautiful young lithe little fish, they swim downstream and out to the sea, where they spend their lives. This friend lives in Washington state, and she's aware that the salmon in her area swim hundreds of miles north, all the way up to Alaska. But at a certain point in their lives, later, when they are no longer such beautiful young little fishies, when these salmon have grown older and look craggy and hook-nosed, and when they actually have turned a different color – – they turn red! – – they feel this powerful compulsion to return to where they were spawned; they return to their roots! They swim all the way back from Alaska to the area around Oregon and Washington State, to find the *very same stream* where they were born, and then they swim upstream to spawn again in the shallows where they were hatched.

Now, this business of swimming upstream is no mean feat for salmon; they have to swim *up* waterfalls, so they are defying gravity, and they are also defying the odds that they will likely become lunch for some hungry bear or bird of prey or other creature waiting to grab them as they fling their bodies upward.

Interestingly, this return of the salmon happens at this particular time of the year, right before the High Holidays. My friend from the Pacific Northwest described how she and her family have a tradition of going and standing by the waterfalls, to cheer the fish on as they fling their bodies upward, inspired with hope and with that compulsion to get back to where they had been born. And when they reach that space, for those who are lucky enough to make it there, they lay their eggs, and then eventually they die, their bodies dissolving into nutrients that support the next generation of young fish and the environment in that area.

My friend described another interesting phenomenon in the lives of the salmon. For some time after the 1980 eruption of Mount Saint Helens in Washington state, the area immediately around there looked like the surface of the moon. It was dull and gray and lifeless. Eventually, vegetation began to grow, and the rivers began to flow again – – but at this point, *they were flowing along different courses*. And there were the salmon, acting on their compulsions to return to their place of spawning.

So how interesting to realize that those salmon, when they are returning, are very different from who they used to be. They are no longer beautiful young fish; now they are older and hook-nosed and craggy, and in many cases they have turned a different color. They are not the same fish that they used to be.

And the place they're returning to has changed as well. Sometimes in fact it has changed so much that the course of a river is in a completely different place. And yet their compulsion to return is innate, ancestral. It's a powerful force that will not let them stay out in the ocean. They have to come home.

We human beings also want to return. We yearn for old familiar places and for old and better parts of ourselves— but like those salmon, we may find that the places we are returning to no longer look familiar. Like the salmon, we too may have changed, sometimes beyond recognition.

My friends, we are tasked at this time of the year with examining our souls and our actions. We're supposed to be looking over our deeds and our patterns of behavior, seeking out not only our sins but also the ways we behave that may really not serve us well. Our Jewish tradition instructs us not only to examine our deeds but also to commit to changing, consciously -- to become the best

people we can be. Like the salmon, rising again and again, we human beings also try to improve ourselves, rising above our faulty patterns of behavior, our weak wills.

Change is not easy! It may be hard to identify what we've done that is not good. It takes some courage to look over our patterns of behavior and to realize how we have fallen short, how what we have done may have hurt others, and how we may have hurt ourselves.

But it is imperative that we continue to grow and change; an organism that does not continually renew itself will die! The ideal is that the change will happen in ways that we have had some input into, some hand in determining the direction of change.

Like the salmon, we too are swimming upstream in life, against the current of our easier and sometimes fault-filled ways of being. But our Jewish tradition supports us in our efforts to return to our best selves. We return to our roots, to the selves we know we could be, and we grow from there.

May we, like those salmon, continue to rise and rise again.
May we rise to be the best people we can be, and may our rising bring much flourishing in the coming year.
And let us say amen.