

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Thanks to Rabbi Baruch Zeilicovich for bringing to my attention the lyrics of "Lose Yourself."

Devar Torah for Yizkor

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One of the advantages of being relatively new to America and more specifically to the New York metropolitan area is that by not having yet experienced the wonders of this country, Silvia, the children and I are very easy to please when it comes to a family vacation.

Four summers ago we discovered Asbury Park, NJ almost by accident and we fell in love with the place. Granted that we haven't visited many other beaches before, or since, but either because we like the quiet beach, or the boardwalk, or because we haven't met any congregant yet during our vacation, we keep going back to the same place, year after year.

People kept insisting that America is a big country and that our vast nation was blessed with many other beautiful landscapes besides Asbury Park, so Silvia and I decided to leave our comfort zone and to look for a new adventure in the south; and so we finally made it to Atlantic City.

Now, as you may know, Atlantic City is somehow different from Asbury Park, but being that Silvia and I don't need much to enjoy a vacation, we fell in love with Atlantic City as well. People tell us that the Grand Canyon and Yosemite are something to see but we are delaying our trip west because we are afraid that after seeing America in its splendor we won't want to come back to the Jersey Shore any more.

In any event, we stayed at the Tropicana Hotel in Atlantic City and we loved it (they promised us a \$30 off coupon if I mention it in my dvar Torah). We enjoyed the beach, the boardwalk, the stores, and why not, the casinos (we made enough money to want to come again to lose it).

As a result, when the children finished with camp, the five of us traveled to Atlantic City for two nights (same hotel but this time cheaper since they keep sending me these coupons by email).

Again we had a great time but since we couldn't go to the casino with the children, we went to the beach during the day and in the evenings we strolled back and forth the length of the boardwalk.

Occasionally the boardwalk has interesting attractions but mostly it consists of stores that sell all the same stuff: towels, sunglasses, hats and t-shirts. Many of the t-shirts graphics were self explanatory although I might not be able to explain them to you in the synagogue. Others had some acronyms which I was able to understand thanks to Daniela who served as my interpreter. One of the t-shirts has the four letters Y-O-L-O, "Yolo," which Daniela immediately deciphered as "You Only Live Once."



I learned that "Yolo" is often used as a hashtag on Twitter to bring attention to exciting events or excuse irresponsible behaviors. Some sites on the internet define it as *carpe diem* for stupid people.

Carpe diem is a phrase from a Latin poem by Horace. It is popularly translated as "seize the day." Although as an aphorism it is often used to emphasize the importance of making the best out of a given situation, in its original context *carpe diem* is part of the longer *Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero* – "Seize the Day, putting as little trust as possible in the future," actually not very different from the "Yolo" motto: "You Only Live Once."

In Atlantic City you get a feeling that a "Yolo" t-shirt belongs there since, paraphrasing the well known saying, "what happens in Atlantic City, stays in Atlantic City," and people really do exciting things –including going to wild parties, smoking forbidden plants, and losing all their savings in the casino, which I guess is justifiable if you convince yourself that you only live once.

Or as Marshall Bruce Mathers III, better known by his stage name Eminem, sings in his song "Lose Yourself"

*Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted in one moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?*

*"You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
You own it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow
This opportunity comes once in a lifetime ¹"*

However, as exciting as "Yolo" is, it could never be a Jewish motto.

First of all, because many of us share this ancient Jewish belief –I am just sharing it with you today without trying to convince you- that we live more than once; that we have a life here and a life in the world to come. In addition, many Jews, yes, including myself, believe that our soul was in this world before and will come again, and again, until it fulfills the unique mission for which it was created.

However, even if it is difficult for you to believe in an existence beyond this physical one, the main idea of "Yolo" is that in life you may have only one opportunity, one chance; and one of Judaism's fundamental tenets is that nobody has only one opportunity, one chance, in life.

This fundamental principle is even more tangible, more palpable today, when we stand in front of our Creator and beg for a second chance.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eminem> and <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/eminem/loseyourself.html>

Stripped from arrogance and pettiness, devoid of any pretension, we proclaim:

*What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our righteousness? What is our attainment, our power, our might?*²

And yet, we fill the synagogues throughout the world and we stand in prayer because we believe in a second chance.

Who doesn't need a second chance? Each of us has something we wish we could do over, start fresh, or finish differently. The High Holy Days –these High Holy days– promise us that we can transcend the past and get the second chance we all need in at least some part of our lives.³

The “Yolo” and *carpe diem* mentality has the potential of exciting us momentarily. “Seize the day!” “Lose Yourself!” “Do it!” “Don’t worry about tomorrow!” “Enjoy life as if there were no tomorrow!”

However, like an emotional and spiritual hangover, the dark side of a “Yolo” and *carpe diem* mentality is a state of depression and despair. If I only live once, if I only have one chance, what will become of me now? I used my chance, I made a boo-boo, and I am finished, doomed, finito, caput.

Today, recognizing our frailty and accepting our mistakes and imperfections, we tell God, we tell ourselves, and we tell each other, that we believe in second chances, that we all deserve a second chance, even if it's our hundredth one, even if we did stupid things, even if until now we went through life with a “Yolo” attitude, with a *carpe diem* mentality.

The essence of t'shuvah, the gift of t'shuvah, is that everybody deserves a second chance. This is the story of the book of Jonah; this is the story of Yom Kippur.

True, our past actions set a limit, somehow, to our future ones. This Yom Kippur we are a year older, our physical strength diminished, and our choices in some way

² Siddur Sim Shalom, PP.13

³ From: Clal: The National Jewish center for Learning and Leadership. 2012.

constrained. We might not be able to erase or undo the past, we might not be able to tear out the pages of the book of our lives, the one we wrote and sealed with our actions, but we can all add a new page in the book of our lives, one that may not be able to erase or undo the past, but one that can transcend it. Each of us gets a second chance, a chance to return to the person we want to be and to living the life we most deeply desire. That's what t'shuvah means, literally.⁴

As we reflect upon the lives of those who preceded us in this world, as we connect with their lives, and their stories, their achievements and their mistakes, their gifts to us and their incomplete to-do lists, let's consider the following questions:

Where do we most need a second chance in our lives? And what are we willing to do in order to take advantage of it?

From whom do we wish we could get a second chance? And how could we begin to let them know that is our desire?

To whom are we willing to offer a second chance this coming year? And how are we going to do it? And finally, how will offering that second chance to someone else liberate us to be who we most want to be?

This is my seventh Yom Kippur with you. By now I know many of you well enough to know that you do not embrace a "You Only Live Once" mentality. I see congregants change in front of my eyes; I see new life being infused in barren spirits. I see people asking for and getting a second chance, and I see people getting a second chance even without asking for one. I see people here at Hillcrest giving others a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth chance. I see a network of good people extending themselves to fellow congregants, offering them not only company, comfort, support and encouragement, but also hospitality, financial support, a job opportunity, a second chance...

In this sacred hour, as we unite ourselves with those who preceded us in the journey of life, we promise to give ourselves the gift of second chance, and we commit ourselves to be that second chance for someone else. United as a

⁴ Based on Clal: The National Jewish center for Learning and Leadership. 2012.

community and united with our brothers and sisters throughout the world we proclaim that we believe in second chances and we ask God to give us one more in this coming year.

May this year bring new opportunities for each of us, and may we all write meaningful pages in the books of our lives. May the memory of our loved ones move us to action, and may God bless each of us and our families with a good, joyous, healthy, sweet, and meaningful year!