

Kol Nidre Remarks by Ed Davidson 9-27-2020

“Life Lessons” Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you tonight. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I’m certainly not known for my profound thoughts or extensive knowledge of religion. I kind of feel like the actor who gets the call to take a part and wonders if he was their first choice, or if there were actually four other guys they really preferred, but each one turned down the offer. Not long after I got that call, Misty and I listened to a series of “Life Lessons” given over a period of five nights by a well-known newscaster who was approaching a milestone birthday of 50 years. We both were impressed with the ideas stated, and I thought perhaps I could base my talk on those. As the holidays got closer, I replayed and took notes on what we had heard. The ideas were still impressive, but they just were not my own. At profound moments in life, or at momentous milestones it is not uncommon to ponder...what does it all mean? What have I learned? What lessons can I take from my experiences? We are all in the midst of a period of profound upheaval unlike anything experienced before in our lifetimes or even in many lifetimes. Simultaneously in the span of only months we have had thrust upon us a worldwide pandemic, catastrophic wildfires, hurricanes, flooding, a racial reckoning, civil unrest, political division, economic disaster, food insufficiency and a nation teetering on a precipice between democracy and authoritarianism. If this was a Hollywood movie, we would all be saying, who came up with all of this crap? Now that I have everyone’s blood pressure on the verge of stroking out, let me turn to the task at hand. What “Life Lessons” can we take from what we are all experiencing? I spoke earlier about the newscaster’s life lessons that felt great to me at first, but on deeper reflection they didn’t fit my sensibilities. I pondered, what was it that made them work for him and less so for me. Was it because he is a devout Catholic with different attitudes than I? For example, his first lesson was, “Life Is Good”. Have you ever heard a gathering of Jews expounding on how good life is? Granted, he did qualify that by saying OK you may be poor, sick or abused, but life is good because of what you decide to make of it, even if this is not easy or always successful. This kind of attitude reminds me of people who say after someone has died, even if by murder, that they are in a better place now. That’s just not something I can find myself believing. Another of his lessons was, “Life is Pain Management”. Everyone has pain, fear, loss, failure and disappointment and it is best not to deny those feelings. He continued, “If you don’t learn pain management, you won’t appreciate the good that comes in life”. True enough, it does no good to wallow in self-pity, but this seems to assume there must be pain as a given. Not a terribly optimistic outlook. Maybe this comes from the idea of original sin. Lest you start to think this talk is going to be a discussion of the merits of Judaism over Christianity, let me pivot to a different point. Earlier this year I began a class with Rabbi Howard Hoffman studying the texts of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The first session, Howard asked me the reason for my interest in the class. I answered, “To tell you the truth, I feel that all religions often cause more harm than good in the world, and I want to know where that comes from. He didn’t seem at all alarmed by that answer. It turns out that the class includes an interfaith group of 10 – 12 people from throughout the world, including Indonesia, Australia, Africa and more. Because of the diverse locations and time zones, we would meet over Zoom and once the pandemic hit, we didn’t miss a beat. If you know Howard, you know that he often states that he is of the opinion that there are no coincidences in life and that every word and detail has a deeper meaning. Over the years, I occasionally had sat in on some random sessions of Rabbi Hoffman’s classes, but this is the very first time I have regularly attended a class from the beginning. When the pandemic lockdowns began, we would start each class with a discussion of the situation in each locale. It was remarkable how similar everyone’s experiences and emotions were throughout the world. As we began to study the religious texts and the history

associated with their development, it became notable how intertwined the religions are. During every class, people were remarking on how many similarities there are between religions, especially Islam and Judaism. Granted, the nature of the class is such that people are self-selecting for those that have an openness and interest in learning about other traditions and not in denigrating one another. But it is apparent that each and every person feels like this class is a small gift from Hashem during this crazy time period. It allows each of us to experience at least for a few moments each week, a world of connectedness, cooperation, and shared humanity. Thus, my first "Life Lesson" involves the Interconnectedness of People. It is remarkable that a small strand of nucleic acid as part of a non-living, non-replicating virus must invade a living cell in order to multiply and cause harm. The fact that such an unassuming particle can so quickly spread over the entire world and wreak such devastating damage is a striking example of just how interconnected we all are. It is ironic that the only way to protect ourselves is to violate that most basic law of humanity...the need for connectedness, the need to touch and interact in a close and personal way. My second "Life Lesson" concerns The Power of the Individual. That power can be actively applied for both good and bad. Coincidentally, that power may also be actively withheld, thus yielding either negative or positive results. Recent events of upheaval are rife with examples of the power of the individual. Pandemic response, police abuse, civil unrest and peaceful protests contain mixtures of both the active application or the withholding of an individual's power. Our government over recent years has shown almost daily examples of the monumental consequences, good and bad, of both the use of or failure to use the power of the individual. Notably, this year saw the passing of two shining examples of the power of the individual, in Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Representative John Lewis. In the 2016 election, around 56% of the U.S. voting-age population cast ballots. Many people think it makes no difference who is in office...they are all the same. Historically those people may be right to a great extent. But there are occasionally examples that prove this false. I remember as a child asking my parents, how could a man like Hitler be elected into power? I don't remember their answer. Either they didn't have one or it seemed too insufficient to be memorable. I remember thinking, what was it about the German people that they could allow such a thing to happen? I think it is only quite recently that many of us have come to understand that there was nothing particularly unique about Germany. Too often, people the world over simply fail to recognize the potential power of an individual leader to materially effect and control the everyday lives of its citizens. As I said earlier, Rabbi Hoffman believes there are no coincidences. What are we meant to make of the circumstances we all find ourselves in at this extraordinary time? There are likely many answers to this question. The one that I have settled on brings me to my third and final "Life Lesson", which is, Stay Awake, Stay Alert! It is easy at times like this to become overwhelmed, depressed and exhausted. Each day brings news of another peril, another warning, more sickness, death and destruction. It's just not in my DNA to wake up and say, Life is Good...it's just what you make of it. However, I can wake up and say, today I must stay vigilant. I must not become immune to injustice. I must not fall prey to cynicism. I must continue to believe in the power of the individual. I must understand that no matter how divided and distant the world seems to be, fundamentally we are all interconnected. The actions of each individual effects the progress, success and health of every other person. On Rosh Hashana, it is said that we are commanded to sound the shofar for ten reasons. I'm not going to go into all of those at this time, but one reason states that the shofar's sound arouses the heart to awe and reverence. Another says the shofar reminds us of the ultimate Day of Judgment. Another reason for blowing the shofar is to inspire us with hope for our people's deliverance from exile. In one way or another, I believe all the reasons for sounding the shofar lead to one thing. We all must Stay Awake, Stay Alert! to all that life brings, good

and bad. We must stay active and engaged in the world and with the people around us. Together we all must pay attention to life's lessons that we have learned through all the difficult shared experiences of today's world. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a better and more healthy year!