

YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR
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It happens in an instant, but it changes everything. For the rest of your life you are never the same. It is the most dreaded word in the English language. The definition of the word sounds innocent enough: "A group of cells display the traits of uncontrolled growth." But there is nothing innocent about it. It is a word that has affected most every family. The word is: Cancer.

You hear that word and nothing is ever the same. The fact of the matter is, more people die from heart disease than from cancer. And the fact of the matter is many forms of cancer are curable, with a long time positive prognosis. And yet, if you or a loved one hears the word "cancer," your world has changed. It is the most dreaded word in the English language, with close seconds being words associated with it; words like "chemotherapy," "radiation," "metastasized," "carcinoma," "malignant," "oncology" and even "biopsy."

There was a time when nobody talked about cancer. It was referred to as the "C" word. And then in 1975, within a period of a few months, three well-known personalities – Betty Ford, Happy Rockefeller and Shirley Temple – told the world that they had cancer. Now it is estimated that one-in-two males and one-in-three females will be diagnosed with cancer.

I speak about cancer today because in this past year cancer made headlines, not on the medical pages, but on the front page of newspapers.

- On Monday, May 19, the entire country was shocked to hear that Sen. Edward Kennedy was diagnosed with brain cancer. Tragically, the Kennedy family is no stranger to cancer; two of Ted Kennedy's children are cancer survivors: one with lung cancer, the other lost a leg to cancer while a teenager.
- The evening of the Senator's announced diagnosis in Boston, John Lester, 24 years old, pitched a no-hitter for the Boston Red Sox. Just two years ago, Lester was diagnosed with a form of lymphoma and he underwent chemotherapy and radiation, and had come all the way back to pitch a no-hitter. "*Mi yichyeh u'mi yomus ... who shall live and who shall die?*" You tell me.
- You tell me how to explain the story of Grant Achatz. He is considered one of the world's greatest chefs. His Chicago restaurant, Alinea, was named the best in the country by Gourmet Magazine. All this at the age of 34. And one thing more: Achatz has cancer ... but not just *any* cancer – as if there is "just *any* cancer." Let me tell you how MSNBC describes it: "Last summer Achatz was diagnosed with advanced tongue cancer. His latest dishes were conceived at a local chemotherapy clinic, as poison dripped into his body, killing not just his malignant cells, but also his sense of taste." The world's greatest chef ... could not even taste his own food. So, you tell me ... is that fair?
- Randy Pausch would tell you that that is not the question. As he put it, "That is what it is. We can't change it; we just have to decide how we are going to respond. We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how to play the hand." Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon, captured the hearts of the American people through a talk he gave at Carnegie Mellon entitled, "The Last Lecture." When Randy Pausch was asked to deliver this lecture, he didn't know that before giving the lecture he would be diagnosed with terminal cancer. Millions have watched the lecture on YouTube. His book about his experience is now a #1 best seller. He even appeared on Oprah. But contrary to popular opinion, Oprah is not more powerful than God. Even Oprah couldn't save him ... he died this summer, 47 years old; leaving behind a wife and three young children, ages 6, 4 and 2. "*Mi bacherev u'mi bachayeh ... who by sword and who by wild beast*" ... and now, who by cancer.
- And then there was Tony Snow. Everyone felt bad when Tony Snow passed away. He was the Press Secretary for George Bush ... and people still liked him! He was a man of deep faith, a family man and a real mensch. But on July 12 his cancer caught up with him. The same day he died, another notable figure died, the famed heart surgeon, Dr. Michael DeBakey. DeBakey died at the age of 99. Why Snow at age 53 and DeBakey at 99? If you know why, please tell me. "*mi b'kitzo u'mi lo b'kitzo - who shall reach the end of days and who shall not?*"

In April, I officiated with Baltimore's Archbishop Edwin O'Brien at the dedication of St. Joseph Hospital's Cancer Center, and he tells me he had two brothers, both died from cancer. And then there were the stories of Bob

Novak, and Elizabeth Edwards and Christina Applegate and Sen. McCain and Ehud Olmert, Gene Upshaw, Steve Jobs, Patrick Swayze, James Levine, Luciano Pavarotti ... and many sitting in our synagogue this morning. And many no longer sitting in our synagogue this morning; people like Karen Wilkowsky. We lost Karen this summer at age 44. She gallantly fought cancer for eleven years. She was as good as they come. Last year she chaired our Susan G. Koman Race for the Cure Committee. She came to shul regularly and prayed, but that didn't seem to make a difference. Just ask Paul Newman ... he gave America healthy food. He helped build and support summer camps for children with cancer and other illnesses. It didn't prevent him from dying from cancer. That's the way it is with cancer. No one is immune! Cancer strikes ... and everything changes! Nothing is ever the same.

But it doesn't have to be cancer, you know, to have this effect. Just ask the family of Tim Russert. "Here today, gone tomorrow" is the reality of life. And it can happen without anyone getting sick. There were plenty of headlines this year of tragedies just as devastating as the word "cancer" ... words like "earthquake," "hurricanes," "cyclones" and "tornadoes." And you never know when it will hit, and you never know where it will hit. One moment you feel like your house is in order, and the next day it's "gone with the wind."

And you know, sometimes even when your house is standing, your home is collapsing. One day you are married to the highest paid baseball player in history, Alex Rodriguez, and the next day you find out that he is hanging out with that *tsatska* Madonna! And nothing is ever the same! And stories like this get played out in our community on a regular basis.

One day you feel that everything is good with your children ... and the next day you find yourself in a support group for parents of teenagers who have fallen apart. One day you are working for a prestigious firm like Lehman Brothers ... and the next day you're out on the street.

Yes, you can believe in God, you can be good and righteous and in tip-top shape, but when you really think about it we are all just one call away, one doctor's visit away, one moment away, from life changing in ways we never could have imagined. All of us at some point in life must go from happiness to sorrow, from health to sickness, from life to death in a split second.

This is the human condition. In a beautiful and sensitive way we are reminded of this every year as we usher in a New Year. Throughout the New Year season we eat honey to symbolize our hope for a sweet year. Why honey? Why not sugar, candy or Sweet & Low? Lots of answers, but a striking one tells us that the honey from a bee is sweet, but the same bee also stings. Using honey on the High Holidays reminds us that while we pray for sweetness in the coming year, we must be prepared for the sting that can come at any time. Or, to put it in not so delicate and sensitive terms: one day you can be flying high like a pigeon ... and the next day you can be the statue. And in these moments before Yizkor, when we are so sensitive to those moments of eternity that separate life from death, when we confront the reality that there will inevitably be changes in the year that lies ahead, how do we come to terms with this truth. How do we understand and how do we live in a world that is made so that the things we value so much can be here today ... and gone tomorrow? That's the question for us to confront today.

So, let me deal with three parts of that question:

- Number one: what do you do and how do you live *before* it happens?
- Number two: what do you do and how do you live *while* it happens?
- Number three: what do you do and how do you live *after* it happens?

Before it happens? The title of Richard Carlson's bestseller from a decade ago still rings true: "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff;" enjoy what you have while you have it.

You know it is said: "There are no guarantees in life." That's not so. There are certain things that are guaranteed: death, heartbreak, loss, suffering of loved ones ... it is inevitable. But there are no guarantees when it comes to good times ... weddings, births, simchas, success ... no guarantees. So, when things are good make sure you enjoy them. There will be enough time in life to worry. Enjoy the good while you can. Don't sweat the small stuff.

Two letter writers to the New York Times reminded me of this. Every Sunday the New York Times Style Section features a sort of “Dear Abby” column entitled “Social Q’s where people write in about family and social problems they are having. One Sunday this summer the lead question was as follows:

“My in-laws are lovely people, without a passive-aggressive bone in their bodies. But they have mispronounced my first name for several years now. It’s an unusual name but most people figure it out after a few gentle corrections. When I first met them, they eagerly asked me to correct their pronunciation and they got it right about half the time, then, a third of the time. Now they are in the habit of saying my name incorrectly and I’m too embarrassed to say anything. When we’re with them for a few days it really starts to grate. Is there a gracious way to handle this?” Roshanne E.

The New York Times’ social commentator advised that the woman’s husband speak to his parents about the problem. I didn’t think that was such a great idea ... I always try to avoid turning a person into the ‘monkey in the middle’ between parents and a spouse. And besides, I thought, what’s the big deal? So her in-laws pronounce her name wrong. Big deal! And I showed the article to Sherry and I told her how I felt. Now, I happen to be married to a woman of principle, and therefore she rarely agrees with what I have to say! But this time, I was surprised when she responded, “I see where you’re coming from ... Michelle!” And so, then I knew how Roshanne felt. And you know what? I still thought: what’s the big deal? Here you have in-laws that you say care about you, that you describe as “lovely people,” who treat you nicely, who are not passive-aggressive. So they pronounce your name wrong ... they’ve tried to get it right. This bothers you so much that you have to write to the New York Times? You’re happily married and get along with your in-laws? Be grateful for that and don’t sweat the small stuff.

One letter writer this summer to the New York Times Social Q’s complained about her synagogue not hanging up a painting she donated. Another writer complained about her chauffeur always humming. These are the things that are eating away at you? You can afford a chauffeur. You have art to give away. Be grateful. Enjoy it. I think Roshanne would feel differently if she were in the same situation that Randy Pausch found himself in while delivering the last lecture. He, too, had an issue with his name. All of his life he wanted to be called “Randy,” but his mother insisted on calling him the way she had named him, “Randolph.” And the disagreement ran deep, as he writes in his book, he said to her:

“Do you really believe your right to name me supersedes my right to have my own identity?” “Yes, Randolph, I do,” she said. Well, at least we knew where we stood! By the time I got to college, I had had enough. She’d send me mail addressed to “Randolph Pausch.” I’d scrawl “no such person at this address” on the envelope and send the letters back unopened ... now, all these years later, I’ve given up. I am so appreciative of my mother on so many fronts that if she wants to burden me with an unnecessary “olph” whenever she’s around, I’m more than happy to put up with it. Life’s too short.”

Yes, life’s too short to sweat over the small stuff. A woman complained to me about her son and daughter-in-law. It bothers her, she said, really bothers her that they have the key to her house and can come over any time. But when she wants to go and see them, she first has to call. And I asked her straight out, “When you call, do they let you in? If they do, fuhgeddaboutit!” Don’t sweat the small stuff! If you do, you will make your children miserable. Indeed, *you* will be miserable! Because you will never be happy with the husband you have.

One of the most widely-read articles in the New York Times this year was written by one of its regular columnists, Maureen Dowd. It was entitled, “An Ideal Husband,” with a priest’s list of “Whom Not To Marry.” There were many readers who disagreed with his list; people who wrote letters to the New York Times saying that they had a *better* list! One of those was a woman named Susan Striker, and here is what she had to say:

To The Editor:

I am a twice-divorced woman and after my second divorce I sat down and wrote a message to women, including these words of advice:

- Never marry a man who yells at you in front of his friends.
- Never marry a man who is more affectionate in public than in private.
- Never marry a man who notices all of your faults, but never notices his own.

So far, so good. But then came things like:

- Never marry a man who doesn't treat his dog nicely.
- Never marry a man who doesn't love music.
- Never marry a man whose plants are all dead.

You tell me: is it any wonder that Susan Striker has been divorced twice? Is there any man that could please her?

I know a lot of men who do much worse than let their plants die. Some of them don't hang up their clothes – real slob! Some of them can't boil an egg. Some of them would throw up if they changed a diaper! Some can't be talked to during a football game on TV. Some have pot-bellies. Some ... well, you know what they do with the toilet seat! So, no, we're not perfect. Neither are our wives! We all have our "shtick" and quirks. But life is so made that we are all going to have our *tsores*. So when things are good, pretty good or relatively good ... don't sweat the small stuff. Randy Pausch's wife says that with her husband dying she learned to let the small stuff slide. Don't wait until then!

Mitch Albom, author of the book, "Tuesdays With Morrie," writes:

I watched my old college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who was dying from ALS, break into tears when he told me of an old friend with whom he had lost touch. Once they had been so close. But a silly little argument had split them apart. "I found out last year," Morrie said, "That this friend died of cancer." He began to weep openly. "I never had the chance to make it up to him. I never had the chance to say 'I'm sorry.' Why did I let that stupid argument separate us for all these years?" "If there's anyone you care about that you're fighting with now," Morrie told me, "let it go. Say you were wrong – even if you think you're right. Because I promise you, when you get to this point in your life ... " He nodded to his dying body ... "You won't care who was right or wrong. You'll only want to savor every minute you had with them."

Yes, it's not a matter of right or wrong ... after a while, who cares? It's a matter of savoring every minute you have, while you have it. It's a matter of don't sweat the small stuff! Birthday cards, caterers, waiters, parking spots, haircuts, wrinkles, where you sit, anything broken or lost or spilt, slights and words and names ... they are all not worth getting upset about. Tim Russert was a smart man. He had one plaque on his office desk which read: "Thou shall not whine." Another way of saying: Don't sweat the small stuff.

Richard Carlson was right when he gave his book that title. But he was only half right. The full title of the book is, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff ... and it's all small stuff!" No, not everything is small stuff. And Richard Carlson learned that lesson himself, the hard way. He had a pulmonary embolism during a flight from San Francisco to New York and died ... suddenly, at age 46. Death and divorce and illness, troubled children, loss of job and yes, cancer ... these are not 'small stuff.' And here's the second lesson we must learn. When you come to the crisis moments in life, your possessions will have little meaning to you. But there are other things that will: your family, friends and God. So don't ask God: why did you do this to me? That question was asked by people a lot smarter than us; people like Abraham and Moses and Job. And it's the wrong question. The period of the Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th century was, in a sense, spurred on by this question when in 1755 an earthquake hit Lisbon, Portugal destroying many of the churches while Lisbon's priests attempted to salvage the crucifixes and religious icons with which to ward off the catastrophe. But it didn't help. Nearly 100,000 people were killed, many in and fleeing from churches. And to top it all off, it occurred on All Saints Day. And to add insult to injury, while most every major church was destroyed, at the brothels in Lisbon's Red Light district, it was business as usual! How could God allow that to happen? Great minds like Voltaire, Kant couldn't comprehend it!

When an earthquake erupts in your life, don't let that cause you to believe that there is no God. That's just when you're going to need God! Sure, there are Jewish religious thinkers like the Baal Shem Tov, the Hassidic master, who believed that everything that happens in this world, every leaf that falls, everything that happens to us, is due to the hand of God. And why it happens only He knows. And there are lots of religious thinkers in our day who believe that. Revs. James Hagee and Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and our own Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashev, the leader of the Hareidi world, has said that cancer is a punishment for sin. Tell that to the children at Hopkins Pediatric Oncology Center! These religious leaders are entitled to their opinions, but I think they're wrong.

And I can prove it to you with the simple words: Lance Armstrong. Lance Armstrong had cancer throughout his system, but he survived. And one thing more: Lance Armstrong doesn't believe in God. Karen Wilkowsky dies ... and he lives?

As Yom Kippur draws to a close, we repeat again and again God's "13 Attributes of Mercy" where we refer to God as being "compassionate" and "gracious" and "slow to anger" and "abundant in kindness." Well, let me tell you in case you haven't noticed: there is nothing compassionate or gracious or kind about cancer. And while I'm at it, let me tell you a few more things. Don't ask "Why me?" because the real question is: Why anyone? No one should have to suffer like I've seen some people suffer. You know that oft-stated line: God doesn't give us more than we can handle? I don't accept that for one second! Plenty of people I know were given a lot more than any human being should be able to handle. The following words are posted on more than 20,000 websites, including an online discussion site for people with stage 4 breast cancer. They read: "I asked God to spare me pain. God said no ... suffering draws you apart from worldly cares and brings you closer to Me." Those words are very nice and very meaningful, but forgive me for saying it, but if God makes me suffer so that I should draw closer to Him ... keep me far, far away from that God. He's a danger to my health! It is a Christian concept that suffering is redemptive, part of the Divine plan. For Jews the words of the Psalmist ring out: "Serve the Lord in joy!"

Some of our people's greatest thinkers had a very different way of looking at things. Maimonides, the great rationalist, taught that natural disasters occur because we are living in a physical world where earthquakes and tsunamis are necessary because they are checks and balances for the universe to maintain its equilibrium. And the reason why these disasters kill humans can be put into three words: location, location, location. If humans were not living in the areas where disasters take place, then they would not have been killed. And as for the survival of the brothels in Lisbon? Unlike the churches, they were built on strong stones.

In regard to illness, listen to this remarkable passage from the Talmud. The Talmud tells us that at the time of conception, an angel takes a drop of semen and holds it before God and asks: will this drop produce someone who is strong or weak, rich or poor, wise or simple. But it does not say: good or bad. That is the statement of the Talmud. For thousands of years it simply sounded esoteric or mystical but in our generation we have discovered it is very real. In 1962, Thomas Watson, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins received the Nobel Prize for discovering DNA – our genetic makeup – something the Talmud was writing about nearly 2000 years earlier. When you are sick and go to the doctor, he doesn't ask you if you've been good or bad ... the doctor asks you for a family history, because our genetic makeup dictates, in large part, whether we will be healthy or sick, whether it is malignant or benign. There are more than 6 billion people living on planet earth, and 99.9% of your genes are the same as everyone else's. The difference is in the remaining 0.1%. That's the difference between "who shall live and who shall die." The luck of the sperm!

So when things go wrong, don't blame God. It is not His fault. And don't blame God because you're going to need Him when disasters hit in your life. They are too big to be handled alone. "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for Thou art with me." It is a good belief with which to die. And it is a great belief with which to live; knowing that whatever storms hit, you'll never walk alone.

And that's why it is so important to maintain a good relationship with your friends. There will come a time – like it or not – when you are going to need them. Don't say: "I'm alright, I can handle it on my own," when you are not alright and you can't handle it on your own. Don't let a word destroy a friendship. Don't sweat the small stuff. A friend is "big" stuff ... too valuable to lose.

But let me tell you something, and I say it only because this is what I've seen – it is not a friend who sleeps over in your hospital room; it's not a friend who fights with the doctors and nurses for you to get better care; it is not a friend whose life changes when yours does. In the August issue of *Vanity Fair*, in the editor's column, Graydon Carter describes the day he flew to Washington for the funeral of Tim Russert. He went there because Russert's wife, Maureen Orth, writes for *Vanity Fair*, and he is close to her. And it was a beautiful act of friendship for him to do that. But in the next paragraph the column goes on to describe how that evening he went to the New York City Ballet to watch the last performance of its principle dancer. Believe me, there is nothing wrong with what he did ... life must go on. But at the same time, I can assure you that none of Tim Russert's relatives went to the ballet that night.

So I tell you: when push comes to shove, that person you married – yes, the one who whines or is sloppy or doesn't pay attention during football, or does the thing with the toilet seat, or even let's your plants die – the one

who is always late and spends too much and always wants to eat out and is allergic to a vacuum cleaner - when push comes to shove, he or she is the one who is going to be there for you.

The fact of the matter is, as time goes by and as we get older, we get closer to our spouses. Scientists say this happens because parts of our brain associated with anger and aggression begin to shrink as we get older. It might be that, but I also think that as we get older, we have learned not to sweat the small stuff; we learn that while the "I want you" may pale with time, the "I need you," kicks in. It is only the first 20 or 25 years that are difficult! But if you hold out, you'll know that there will always be someone there for you. Friends will come to visit, but it is family that does not leave.

And it's not just your spouse. Fifteen years ago I received a lovely note from Hillary Clinton. Ben Cardin had sent her a sermon of mine where I pointed out that she – along with her mother and brothers – had spent 16 days together at the bedside of her dying father, Hugh Rodham. Why did she do it, I asked? She could have gotten help. She was the first lady, a busy woman. But, I guess there was something in her that wouldn't let her do anything else ... for her, there was nothing more important than being with her father.

She wrote me: "Your words and their meaning touched my heart, as I am sure it affected those who heard you. Your gentle encouragement to us all to treasure family and friends could not be more timely." She's right, you know. After all is said and done, that's the bottom line in life, the words of the immortal Sister Sledge: We are family!

Hillary Clinton's father was not an easy man. He was gruff and argumentative. But it didn't matter. And it shouldn't matter if our brothers and sisters are not quite what we want them to be. What a tragedy it is if, when tragedy hits, we have no one to turn to or to lean on because we allowed some family squabble or distance to tear us apart. Not all the members of our families are lovable, and certainly at times they hurt us. But remember, when times of crisis come, they are the ones who will cry for us and be with us. Don't rob yourself of what is perhaps your most important possession in life.

Yes, it is the strength we gain from others that helps us through when the storm hits. The fact of the matter is, if we can hold out, eventually the storms pass. Look at cancer: in 1930, 1 in 5 cancer patients survived. Today 50% survive. The fact is cancer is a disease, not a death sentence. Remember those three people who in 1975 put cancer on the map ... Betty Ford, Happy Rockefeller and Shirley Temple? They are still alive. There has been remarkable progress in the battle against cancer. But I've discovered something even more remarkable. Amongst those who survived, and those who don't, many – if not most – say they were much better people after the diagnosis ... after learning that they had cancer. Steve Jobs said it. Tony Snow said it. Randy Pausch said it.

Betty Rollin – a writer and award-winning TV journalist who has survived breast cancer – recently wrote a book entitled, "Here's The Bright Side: of failure, fear, cancer, divorce and other bum raps." Yes, she speaks of the 'bright side' and this from a woman whose cancer had recurred and required a second surgery. She describes how, because of the experience, she now views everything in life differently. In her words: "You talk to yourself a lot more now, and when you do you say things like 'The plumber is late but it's not cancer' That becomes a sort of mantra. 'It's the worst haircut I've ever had in my life, but it's not cancer' ... I missed my flight, but it's not cancer ...' I completely overcooked the lamb, but it's not cancer ...' I'm having a root canal tomorrow morning, but it's not cancer ..."

There is a whole field of psychology that is focusing on this phenomenon which they label "post-traumatic growth." Yes, whether it's cancer, or a hurricane, or a fire, or a divorce, or a job loss ... or some other tragedy that inevitably hits us, we learn from the experience and we can grow from the experience.

I think of the long married couple, both successful in what they did, both having busy professional lives ... and then she developed cancer – a cancer which, after surgery, was going to require months of chemotherapy and radiation. And from that day on, their marriage changed. He – the busy executive who was always so busy with his job and appointments – suddenly discovered that there was nothing more important than his wife. Every time she went for chemotherapy treatment, every time she went for radiation, he didn't just drive her there and pick her up ... he sat next to her holding her hand. From her cancer, he had learned what really counts and she had learned that she could count on him.

The only problem is, oftentimes the change doesn't last and we go back to being our same old selves. I remember in the days that I was a rabbi in Washington, I weighed 225 pounds. I know it must have been hormonal

or a thyroid condition or my metabolism ... it had nothing to do with how much I ate! And then one day I visited a member of the congregation – a heavyset man who was in the Intensive Care Unit at Washington Hospital Center suffering from a massive heart attack – and he said to me, “After this, I’m going to lose the weight and rabbi, as your friend, you should do it too.” I walked out of that room a changed man. I knew he was right and I told myself: this is it! This is a new you ... this is the first day of the rest of my life. And I got on the elevator in the hospital and went down to the first floor, got out and went straight to the gift shop and ate a Three Musketeers bar in the car driving home!

Yes, it’s not easy to change. We learn from our experiences but what we learn oftentimes doesn’t last, because you know what they say: You can’t change human nature. Well, let me tell you ... if you can’t change human nature, then this day of Yom Kippur is totally meaningless. The whole purpose of the High Holidays is to inculcate within us a commitment to change. And people do change, you know, and make the changes last.

Tom Coughlin won the Super Bowl because he changed. Tom Coughlin is the coach of the New York Giants and his team won the Super Bowl this year. But the year before his team had fallen apart and he was on the verge of losing his job. His wife and children told him what the problem was: HE was the problem! He was too strict, too stern, too petty in the way he dealt with his players. And he heard that, took the words to heart ... and he changed ... and they won the Super Bowl.

So, you tell me: how many of us have spouses and children who, in one way or another, are asking us to change ... and we don’t hear them, or we don’t listen to them. And they mean it for our own good! We *can* change! In fact, we are constantly changing! I once read a memorable line in a novel where a disgruntled husband says to his wife, “You should have married a better man.” To which the wife replied, “I did.” Yes, he had changed ... but had changed for the worse. In the movie “Spiderman,” when Peter Parker gets bitten by a spider and begins turning into Spiderman, Uncle Ben tells him, “You’re changing and that’s normal. Just be careful who you change into, okay?”

I tell you ... I am changing. I have changed since I turned 60. I changed since I became a grandfather. Let me give all of you some wisdom that I’ve discovered: as you get older ... you don’t get any younger! Your perspective begins to change, but does it change for better or for worse? I see the changes in so many of you as you get older:

- Some of you are getting more grumpy; others are becoming more grateful.
- Some of you resist change like it’s the plague; others welcome change as the antidote to “same old, same old.”
- Some of you become more miserly; others become more generous. The miserly ones are the ones constantly worrying that they are going to outlive their retirement money even though they would have to live to 170 to do that! The generous ones are those who appreciate the lesson a colleague of mine put so well, when at the funeral of a wealthy man he was asked how much the man had left, he replied: “He left it all.”
- Some of you cringe at the sound of a child, your nerves can’t take it, you say. Others welcome the presence of a child as a shot of adrenaline to their hearts. My mother used to tell of an elderly man in her building who, whenever the grandchildren came to visit, used to joyously put \$5 in his pushka. When they left he joyously put in \$20! I am one of those who, when the grandchildren leave, give them the \$20 and a lot more to make sure they come back soon!

Change for the better ... or change for the worse ... it’s up to each and every one of us. We have to make it happen. Don’t stand on principle. When it comes to family there is only one principle that counts: we are family! Randy Pausch writes, “All my adult life I felt drawn to ask long-married couples how they were able to stay together. All of them said the same thing: we worked hard at it.” Yes, it’s hard work, but it is worth it. And similarly, with our parents it is *we* who have to reach out to *them*. They are getting old and they may be getting cranky, and they are most probably very scared. Their days of “doing” and “reaching out” for us are over. But we can give them something if we reach out to them. You know what we can give them? We can give them a hug and kiss. When people are in their 80’s, oftentimes the only human touch they get is from a doctor. There was a time when we yearned for a hug from them. Now, they need a hug from us! If you are fortunate enough to still have a living parent, don’t wait ... do it now before it’s too late.

And what can we do for our parents who are gone? Here too, there is room for change. They can't change now, but we can. We can change our view of them. My father died of cancer at 79, while my mother died close to 95 because she must have gotten tired of smacking around the Angel of Death. My parents were very different in their deaths. When his cancer was diagnosed my father had been told that prostate cancer moved very slowly and he had six months to five years to live. He died exactly six months later. My mother could never understand why it wasn't the five years. And the last weeks of his life were terrible ones; spent in a hospital room where he was racked with pain as the cancer spread through his system. My mother died very peacefully at home after asking for ice-cream. Her manner of death was a blessing. His, a curse! Yes, you need mazel even in death.

But when I think about it, their deaths were very much in keeping with their lives. My mother grew up with her brother and two sisters with whom she remained close all her life. It was a well-known family in the New York community; quite comfortable and very respected. It was little wonder that she was a woman who was always alive, energetic, told it like it was, and lived every day to the fullest.

My father had a very different life. He was born in pre-WWI Hungary, his father died at age 34 when my father was only four years old – died from cancer. My grandmother – his mother – was a sickly woman who worked hard to keep the family together. But when she couldn't, my father and his siblings were separated and raised in different homes. They never had the close relationship of my mother's family. And one can understand why ... and perhaps one can understand why my father was a bit more reserved and insecure, a lot more reluctant to exhibit emotion, with an approach toward life that saw it more as a challenge than simply something to be cherished.

I understand all that now. But I didn't understand it then ... when I was a kid ... when it was my mother, not my father, who used to take me to the park to play catch. I didn't understand then that my father never played catch with his father because he didn't have a father, and that a park brought back memories to my father of his youth where the Gentile boys in Hungary used to beat up the Jewish kids and pull on my father's peyos ... in the park. We, of our generation, oftentimes say that our parents didn't understand us. And that may very well be true. But now that we are older and have faced some challenges, as they also faced, let us be cognizant of the fact that we really didn't understand our parents. Let me tell you something about our parents. Many of our parents had cancer. Not a physical one, but an emotional one, but no different than a physical one ... it was like a malignancy that ate at their inner core. And just as cancer can hit physically even if one never smokes or eats all the right food and takes the best care of themselves, so too, someone can suffer emotionally, even when surrounded by the most loving family and have everything in the world to live for. Many of our parents did not have the happy childhood that we had. And it took a toll on them for the rest of their lives. We didn't understand that when we were young, but now we do! And how we viewed them then need not be the way we view them now.

Yizkor beckons ... the clock is ticking. New York's Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, goes out of office a year from November. He has installed in his office, for himself and all of his staff, a clock that lists every day how many days he has left in office. On Sept. 30, 2007, in a speech he said, "I've got roughly 825 days left to go." On July 16, 2008, he said, "I have 533 days left to go." On top of the clock are the words: Make Every Day Count. He now wants to extend his term. You may be able to do that in politics, but you can't do it in life! Many times cancer patients have told me that they feel like a time bomb; that their clock is ticking. The countdown has begun. But you know what? It's true for all of us! Perhaps Nancy Reagan put it best when she was informed she had a malignancy and responded, "I guess it's my turn!" That's the human condition. All of us are just one tick away from our life changing in ways that we could never imagine. And so, our challenge is to make every day count. Let us cherish our family and friends and enjoy them while we have them ... and enjoy life while we have it ... before change – the inevitable, inescapable, frightening changes of life – confront us.

Before she died, I told Karen Wilkowsky that she was going to another world; a world where she would be rewarded for her goodness, and would be at peace. I trust she is there now ... along with all our loved ones. For you and I, I pray that this year will be a year of changes, all for the better and we will find peace in our homes and in our hearts. Let it be a year in which cancer – that blight on humanity – will finally be cured, along with all the other illnesses that envelope our planet, a year in which the dream of the prophet will be fulfilled: "*Bila hamoves lanetzach u'mocho Hashem dimah meal kol ponim* – the Lord God will blot out death forever and He will remove tears from every face." Amen.