

**Celebrating Birthdays**  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 2013  
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This summer, birthdays seem to have taken center stage. Not only does the birthday of the world come on the heels of Labor Day - while we're still trying to enjoy the last bits of summer, but - do you remember what July was all about? How flooded we were with news about the impending birth on the other side of the Atlantic? Every move that Kate and William made as they waited for the big day, was reported by the media! When the baby finally arrived on July 22, we were awash with pictures and stories about the birth of Prince George.

And then, two days later, another big birthday arrived. Albeit, not nearly as widely celebrated but a "big birthday" none-the-less - at least for me, or more precisely for my husband. (And just for the record, he did give me permission to disclose this information.) We celebrated his "big birthday" by bringing together the family for a full day of festivities that included food - of course, skits, speeches and songs. Quite the *simcha*! But despite the fact that tonight we gather to celebrate the birthday of the world, which turns 5, 774 years old to be exact, in our tradition birthdays don't actually have much "staying" power.

What I mean is this: in our secular culture we remember our leaders by their birthdays. There is Lincoln's birthday and Washington's birthday, and more recently, Martin Luther King's birthday. Unfortunately, these holidays have become opportunities for shopping at a discount rather than celebrating the legacy of these leaders. (But that's another story.)

In Judaism, however, we remember both our leaders and our loved ones on the day they died, on their *yartzeit*, rather than on their birthdays. When I open my Jewish calendar to any random page I see, for example, that on the 1st of *Elul* is the *yartzeit* of Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel. His birthday isn't noted, only his *yartzeit* appears on my Jewish calendar.

It's also interesting to consider that in Torah there is only one reference to a birthday celebration for an adult. I wonder whether you can guess whose birthday that is. I'll give you a few seconds...

The Torah tells us that while Joseph was in captivity in Egypt, there was a birthday celebration to honor pharaoh. It's ironic that this one adult birthday celebration was in honor of an Egyptian. I say this because the religion of ancient Egypt was centered on a death-cult of mummies, pyramids

and embalming which is in sharp contrast to the ancient Israelite tradition that sanctified life above almost everything else! And while today Jews certainly celebrate birthdays and perhaps - like me, make a big fuss about both big and small ones, it's our day of passing rather than our birthday that endures.

Why is this? Why remember a loved one on their *yartzeit* rather than on their birthday? One possible answer is that on our birthdays we are a blank slate. We don't know what will become of our lives. It's only after someone has lived that we understand the meaning and teaching of their life. On a *yartzeit* we look back and remember the specific qualities or character traits of that person; we remember the values they stood for and what they taught us. We remember the difference they made in our lives and in the lives of others.

And perhaps another reason that we remember a loved one by marking their date of passing is because it helps us reflect on the meaning and the span of our own lives. If we remember that our loved ones died, probably without fulfilling all of their life's dreams and ambitions perhaps it will spur us to live life a bit more intensely, with more love, forgiveness and generosity.

And so tonight, when we come together to celebrate the birthday of the world and embark on this process of self-reflection let us consider the legacy we want to leave behind. How might we re-align our priorities as we move forward? And what are the relationships we need to mend?

These are the questions that take center stage. While my hope is that we will celebrate many more years together, the High Holydays remind us that our days in this world are limited and that we don't know what the future will bring. And underlying this message is a sense of urgency – an insistence that the time for *t'shuva*, for turning towards our best and truest selves, is now.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us pray for the strength to know what we should do – even when it is hard or un-familiar. Let us pray for the ability to make good use of the life that we are given. Along with the psalmist let us call out: “Teach us to number our days so that we may achieve a heart of wisdom.” Although our own birthdays might not have much “staying” power, we do. We do, if we fashion for ourselves the type of life, of legacy, that that will find its way into the hearts and minds of others.