

The Space Between the Shemas
Temple Emanu-El Atlanta
Kol Nidre Sermon | 20 September 2026
Delivered by Rabbi Rachael Klein Miller

In his essential book *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Alan Lew describes Yom Kippur as a "compressed journey, *k'fitzat ha-derech*, the voyage from birth to death." Tonight we wear white because it echoes our burial shrouds. We fast because the dead do not eat. At the beginning of our service we gazed into an empty ark – an *aron* the same word as casket. Yom Kippur isn't a metaphor; it's our rehearsal.

As a rabbi, my privilege and my heartbreak is that I stand at this symbolic threshold once a year, and then I am invited to stand there again and again, in real time, in the rawest, most unguarded moments of human existence. This past year, I stood at the edge of the universe with two families.

My first visit with death was found in a quiet hospital room. There, I went to visit Elaine, the elderly mother of a congregant. We weren't sure if death was waiting in the room with us. But as the night wore on, we began to understand that there was no going back to any home outside *Olam Habah*, the world to come. The heavy, unmistakable atmosphere was settling over us, a life was slipping away. It's a weight that you recognize and cannot name.

It was a hard, rattly death. She couldn't speak and her family was struggling to understand the few faint sounds she could make.

In a moment that felt right, I invited the family to huddle around Elaine; their mother, their grandma, their sister, their mother-in-law and I asked if they would like me to bring some prayer and music into the room. They nodded. We stood by her bedside and began to softly sing *Oseh Shalom*. [sing] *Oseh shalom bimromav...*

And then, something miraculous happened. We watched, as Elaine's mouth began to move to the rhythm of the words. She mouthed and made the sound to <every> <single> <word> of the prayer. Elaine's conscious mind was slipping away, but her soul knew every word of that prayer. Those were the only clear sounds I heard her make that entire night.

The Talmud tells us that before we are born, an angel teaches our soul the entire Torah. Then, at the moment of birth, the angel touches our lips and we forget. But watching Elaine, I understood something I hadn't before: *we don't learn our prayers, we remember them*. They are not information stored in the mind. They are written into the muscle memory of our soul. When her body could no longer speak, her soul reached for the words it had always known. They had been there all along.

We often sit through services wondering if we "know enough" Hebrew or if we "really" understand the liturgy. But Elaine's soul reminds us that these words are baked into our spiritual DNA. They'll be there for us in the moments we need them: when we're scared, when we're confused, when we're feeling unsure. The more we use them, the more deeply rooted that pathway becomes.

The second deathbed was entirely different. Unfair. Universally a nightmare. This was the deathbed of Jack, forever 29 years old, in the trauma ICU following a devastating motorcycle accident. It had been touch-and-go all week, but the time had come to accept the unacceptable and his family made the honorable decision to pursue organ and tissue donation.

When we stepped out of his room to begin what is called an honor walk, we were not prepared for what we saw: a hallway overflowing with people who loved Jack and his family. There are no words for what it looks like when rows upon rows of people have gathered to say I love you and I will not let you go alone. It was an amazing, overwhelming moment.

And as we escorted him, the sounds of Lynyrd Skynyrd's Free Bird, a favorite song of his, played from a speaker.

"If I leave here tomorrow, would you still remember me? For I must be traveling on, now, 'cause there's too many places I've got to see."

We escorted him down that hallway, surrounded by everyone who would, in fact, always remember him.

Down in the pre-op room, the only sounds were the beeping of his machines, the weeping of his family, and Jack's favorite songs cycling through the speaker. Just as the final guitar solo faded, I received a nod from one of the nurses, gathered myself, and recited the closing words for his soul: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*.

And then: *Adonai natan, Adonai lakach, y'hi sheim Adonai m'vorach* – God gives, and God takes away; blessed be the name of God.

The Zohar describes the Shema as the wings that carry a soul upward when it untethers from the physical body. In that messy, heartbreaking, holy room, Free Bird was Jack's earthly song of freedom, but the Shema became his cosmic song of liberation.

When our bodies fail, when tragedy strikes, when we have no words left, our souls still know how to speak. Judaism provides us with the vocabulary of eternity.

But our vocabulary of eternity does not begin at the end.

Just as the Shema and Oseh Shalom carry us out of this world, our sacred words are there to welcome us into it. Our holy words create a perfect circle.

I often incorporate a new ritual into the baby namings I perform. I bring out a Torah scroll and drape it with a tallit. I gather the whole family around and we place the baby on the scroll. Then I take a mezuzah and gently place it against the baby's heart. Together, the entire room sings Shema, often with tears of joy and gratitude running down their cheeks.

Then I give that mezuzah to the parents and ask them to affix it to the doorpost of their child's room. Some of the very first Hebrew words these babies hear are Shema Yisrael. The angel may have taken them away just before they were born, but on the day of their naming, surrounded by family and friends, they begin to remember.

From the moment we say Shema and lay a mezuzah against a baby's heart, to the moment a rabbi leans over a deathbed and recites those same ancient words – there is a whole life. And Yom Kippur asks us: what are we doing with that time in between?

This is where the dress rehearsal of Yom Kippur demands an answer.

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Eliezer taught: “Make *teshuvah* – repent and return – the day before your death.” His students, reasonably confused, asked him, “But how do we know which day we are going to die?” Rabbi Eliezer smiled and replied, “Exactly. Therefore, a person must live every single day in a state of *teshuvah*.”

Today, when we confront our mortality, it requires us to cut through the noise and have the “if only” thoughts while we still have time to change the outcome. If only I had spent more time with my children and less time at the office. If only I had pursued a career I was passionate about and left the job I hated. If only I had fixed the relationship that was broken instead of being too scared to confront it.

We all know the stories of tragic events, like 9/11, when people who were trapped in buildings or on planes called home. They didn't call to talk about money or the fight they'd had over breakfast. They called to say: “*I love you. Take care of the kids. Remember me.*”

The heartbreak of human nature is that we sometimes wait for the literal deathbed to find that kind of clarity. Yom Kippur is our annual disruption. Just as we build the muscle memory to sing our prayers when our minds fail, we must build the muscle memory of *teshuvah* today. We must practice the habit of forgiveness, the habit of saying ‘I love you,’ the habit of letting go of petty grievances. We practice it today, during this rehearsal, so that it becomes second nature tomorrow. Yom Kippur is

designed to spare us from a lifetime of "if onlys" by challenging us to look at our lives through the lens of our mortality today, right now while our hearts are still beating.

Tonight, we are balancing between the Shema that welcomed us into this world or into the Jewish people, and the Shema that will one day carry us out. We are balancing between the person we were last year and the one we want to be tomorrow.

When we began Kol Nidre we gazed into an empty ark, and stood before the court of eternity, the ultimate Judge. In that moment, we transformed our sanctuary into a courtroom. Now, there are no more excuses, no social masks, and no professional titles. Tomorrow we will gather in prayer throughout the day. Then, we will end Yom Kippur with the same words we recite when someone dies: Adonai Hu HaElohim – Adonai, is God. The rehearsal will be complete.

Then, tomorrow night, the heavy wooden doors of our ark will roll shut. The doors of our sanctuary will swing open, and the hot Atlanta autumn air will hit our faces. When we take that next deep breath of life, may we picture that little mezuzah pressed against our beating heart, guiding the words we choose to speak. May we go out into the world tomorrow, feel that pulse, and live every breath as someone who recognizes that the days between our Shemas are counting down and yet we have every opportunity to live each one out with meaning and beauty.

[Free Bird Anthem – adapted]

If I leave here tomorrow
Would you still remember me?
For I must be traveling on, now
'Cause there's too many places I've got to see
But if I stay here with you, girl
Things just couldn't be the same
'Cause I'm as free as a bird now
But this bird you **can** change
Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh
And the bird you **can** change
And this bird you **can** change
Lord knows I **can** change