



Things Worth Remembering: To Be Worthy of Standing Before God



"EACH OF US, IN OUR LIVES, OUGHT TO FIND SOMETHING WE LOVE —AN AVOCATION—THAT ALSO FULFILLS WHAT WE NEED AND ARE CALLED TO DO," WRITES MEIR SOLOVEICHIK. (DAVID SILVERMAN VIA GETTY IMAGES)

On Yom Kippur, we ask how to live a meaningful life. A poem by Robert Frost offers a striking answer.

By Meir Soloveichik

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— Remembering



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Welcome to *Things Worth Remembering*, our weekly column in which writers share a poem or a paragraph that all of us should commit to heart. This week, ahead of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik reflects on one of Robert Frost's lesser-known poems—which can help answer the question: *What makes for a meaningful life?*



In 1956 [a young rabbi visited](#) Robert Frost in his Vermont home. Frost's visitor, Aharon Lichtenstein, came from a very different world than the non-Jewish poet and would later be celebrated as one of the greatest Jewish scholars in the world. But he was also a scholar of English literature and quoted Frost all his life, going so far as to deliver a *shiur*, or Torah lecture, [entirely inspired by](#) the poet's "[Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)." That a rabbi would seek out time with Frost reflects the universal nature of Frost's poetry and the way his best work can transcend cultural boundaries and touch our souls.

It is, therefore, perhaps not as counterintuitive as one might think for a rabbi to turn to Frost in advance of this Wednesday night, when Yom Kippur begins, as I prepare to recite prayers that have been lovingly said by my ancestors, year after year. Jews, many of whom rarely attend services, will nevertheless turn out on the holiest night of the year, in the knowledge that they are walking a path paved by the past. We will focus on our failures and look forward to the year ahead. Above all, we will ask ourselves:

What makes for a meaningful life? How do I wish to be remembered? What do I want my epitaph to be?

In answering this question, I turn to a poem by Frost that Rabbi Lichtenstein himself might cite. The poem is titled “[Two Tramps in Mud Time](#).” It is one of his lesser-known ones. It is also longer than some of his other work, and—somewhat unusually for Frost—explicitly religious, invoking Heaven in its conclusion.

In it, Frost transforms a simple story into a marvelous metaphor for how we ought to live. It is the perfect poem to read in preparation for the prayer and reflection that Yom Kippur demands.

Frost begins by describing himself, as he so often does, in a rural setting. He is chopping wood, an activity that he loves. For him, the activity is not necessary at all. As he reflects, nothing is gained for the “common good” by his chopping; it merely provides relaxation and exercise.

*Good blocks of oak it was I split
As large around as the chopping block
And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
The blows that a life of self-control
Spares to strike for the common good,
That day, giving a loose my soul,
I spent on the unimportant wood.*

Then, two loggers emerge from the local lumberyard—not to admire Frost, but to silently protest his activity. Chopping wood is the source of their livelihood, on which Frost’s extracurricular engagement unjustly infringes.

Frost grudgingly concedes the point, reflecting that his enjoyment of wood-chopping does not, and cannot, override their need for work. “My right might be love but theirs was need,” he writes, and “Theirs was the better right.”

Thus, love gives way to need. But even as Frost concedes the point, he reflects that ideally, both love *and* need should be joined together, not only in chopping lumber, but in life.

*My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.*

It is hard to think of a more sublimely succinct summary of a good life. Each of us, in our lives, ought to find something we love—an avocation—that also fulfills what we need and are called to do.

This is, in many ways, what Yom Kippur is about. Much of the holiday liturgy reflects on the fragility of life and the fallibility of human existence. These reminders of our mortality are meant to inspire awe and repentance. But the concluding prayer of the Yom Kippur service offers a different, more positive, note:

You have separated man from the very beginning, and recognized him as worthy of standing before You.

Human beings, the Bible informs us, have sinned from the very beginning; and, in the Yom Kippur liturgy, we confess our failure to fulfill fully the many obligations of Judaism that Jews call *mitzvot*.

Yet as the medieval sage Maimonides reflects, the existence of a myriad of *mitzvot* also means that we can each find one at which we excel, which we can also love, and which we can make our own. And in so doing, we

discover our calling—and reveal ourselves as still worthy of standing before our Creator.

And so, as we examine our lives on Yom Kippur, we are encouraged to ask: What is our avocation that might also be our vocation? What do we love to do that also allows us to make a positive impact on those around us? What can we be doing for our family, our community, our society, that is an expression of both love and need? How can we become worthy of standing before God?

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The Miracle of the Light

Naturally, we don't always get it right. I often think of the play *A Man for All Seasons*, in which a British statesman advises an ambitious young man that he is better suited to a life as a teacher than as a figure of great acclaim and status. To this, the young man responds: "If I was" a teacher, "who would know it?" The statesman has a ready rejoinder: "You, your pupils, your friends, God; not a bad public, that."

Like the young man, we are often mistaken about which of our audiences truly matter. It is human nature to make such mistakes. But each of us is known by God and created in his image. This means that we, too, have the capacity, and the duty, to impact creation, and we will ultimately answer for whether we have lived up to our potential.

Yom Kippur invites us to orient ourselves toward the audiences that matter most. It is a day when we can come closer to the lives God calls us to lead. And it is a time to commit to deeds, big and small, done "for

Heaven and the future's sakes," so that we live in a way that "love and need are one."



Things Worth Remembering will be back in your inbox next Sunday. In case you missed it, last week Spencer Klavan [reflected on visiting the grave of John Keats, the magnificent Romantic who died believing the world didn't care for his work.](#)

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David Brown  3d

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Rabbi, thank you. I intuitively knew from the title of the piece, and the mentioning of "a poem by Robert Frost," that said poem would be "Two Tramps In Mud Time." This is my favorite poem by Robert Frost. It had been a long time since I've read it. I recently have started rereading regularly, as an exercise to help me recalibrate, and help me reconcile my "mission" so to speak. It's also helping me understand my obligation to G-d, to live this beautiful gift of life He so graciously bestowed upon me. Again, thank you for the reminder.

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Steven Brizel  Steven Brizel 3d

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Awesome essay and great perspective on what Yom Kippur is supposed to be about

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