

YOM KIPPUR DAY 2026 — Rabbi Raina Sirotky

A GOOD NAME

Good morning, and g'mar tov.

There is no day in the Jewish year quite like Yom Kippur. For twenty-five hours, ordinary life is suspended. We step away from work and from the routines that normally organize our days. Those who are able, do not eat or drink. We gather here, many of us dressed in white, and spend hour after hour in prayer, confession and reflection. There are several explanations for why we wear white on Yom Kippur. One tradition teaches that on this day we resemble the *malachei hasharet*, the ministering angels, setting aside for a little while the ordinary needs and distractions of physical life so that we can devote ourselves more fully to what is sacred.

This year, here in East Tennessee, just a few weeks ago, we lost an angel. Dolly Parton—a little girl born into poverty in the Smoky Mountains who grew up to be loved around the world. Imagine spending eighty years on this earth, writing more than three thousand songs, winning eleven Grammy Awards, ten CMA Awards and an Emmy, selling more than one hundred million records, becoming one of the most recognizable human beings in the world. Imagine a lifetime filled with that much accomplishment. And then imagine reaching the end of it and discovering that those are not the things people most talk about.

People speak about her kindness and her generosity. They talk about the way she remained unmistakably, iconically herself. They talk about how readily she championed other people and their differences, how comfortable she seemed celebrating and promoting others' talent, and how often she used what she had been given to make something possible for somebody else. They talk about the millions of books placed into the hands of children, the generosity she showed to people in need and her loyalty to these mountains and to the people who formed her. And again and again, they talk about the way she blessed others. Her own family, announcing her death, spoke not only of her music but of her warmth, her kindness, her compassion, her resilience and her commitment to making the world better. Her honors were enormous, but still, what people spoke about most was her character—the person she was.

The Book of Proverbs says, *Nivchar shem me'osher rav*—"A good name is more desirable than great wealth." Proverbs is placing two very different measures of a life beside one another. There is what we accumulate—and there is who we are.

Think of King Hezekiah and his son Manasseh. Hezekiah possessed enormous wealth. Chronicles tells us that he had riches and honor in abundance—treasuries filled with silver and gold, precious stones and all the possessions of a king. And when he died, his son Manasseh inherited the throne, the palace, the power and the privilege that came with being king of Judah. Materially, Manasseh began with everything his father had possessed. But he did not inherit his

father's name. The Book of Kings remembers Hezekiah as a king who "did what was right in the eyes of God." Of Manasseh, only one generation later, it says that he "did what was evil."

What we possess can pass from one generation to another. Character cannot. A person can inherit a fortune, a title, a business, even a famous family name. But a *shem tov* has to be lived into existence.

Ecclesiastes gives us another image: *Tov shem mishemen tov*—"A good name is better than fine oil." Even in Hebrew there is a play in the words: *shem*—a name; *shemen*—oil. The rabbis were fascinated by that comparison. *Kohelet Rabbah* says that oil flows downward, while a good name rises. Oil lasts for a time; a good name can endure and travel far beyond the place where a person actually lived. And perhaps, as Jews, we hear something else in the word *shemen*. We know what oil can represent.`

At Hanukkah, a small amount of oil becomes the source of light. According to the Talmud, what should have lasted for one day continued burning for eight. But even that miraculous oil eventually burned away. The light it represented did not. More than two thousand years later, we still kindle those flames. Perhaps a good name works something like that.

A human life is finite. Eventually the vessel empties. But what was kindled through that life can continue illuminating other lives long afterward. The oil is gone. The light continues. *Tov shem mishemen tov*. A good name is better than fine oil.

Pirkei Avot takes this idea even further. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, one of the great 2nd-century sages of the Mishnah, taught that there are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of royalty. *V'keter shem tov oleh al gabeihen*. But the crown of a good name rises above them all. Judaism values learning. Judaism respects sacred responsibility. Jewish history certainly understands the power of leadership. And still Rabbi Shimon says there is another crown that stands above them. *Keter shem tov*. The crown of a good name.

Our names carry more than identification. Over time, they acquire meaning. And that is where *shem tov* becomes particularly interesting on Yom Kippur. Because Judaism does not believe that the meaning of a human name has to remain fixed. Consider Oskar Schindler.

We hear that name today and immediately associate it with the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. But that is not what the name Oskar Schindler meant in 1939. He was a member of the Nazi Party who came to German-occupied Poland hoping to profit from the war. He took over businesses that had been confiscated from their Jewish owners and used forced Jewish labor. There was very little in the early chapters of his story that suggested moral greatness.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum describes what followed not as one dramatic conversion, but as a slow transformation. Schindler witnessed the deportations, the brutality,

people he knew disappearing. At first, some of his interventions may still have been motivated by business. But gradually his choices changed. He began using his money, his connections, his

charm and his access to Nazi officials—even some of the very qualities that had once served his own ambition—to protect Jewish lives.

As the war turned against Germany, Schindler obtained permission to move roughly a thousand Jewish prisoners with his factory to Brännlitz. During the final months of the war, he spent the fortune he had accumulated trying to keep them alive. By liberation, more than a thousand Jews had survived because of his efforts. In 1993, Yad Vashem formally recognized Schindler as **Righteous Among the Nations**. Think about the distance contained in his name. That may be precisely why his story belongs on Yom Kippur.

There is a temptation when we speak about *teshuvah* to make it cleaner than human life really is. We like stories with a clear before and after: the person was one way, something happened, and from that moment forward everything changed. Most human beings do not change like that. We change unevenly. Sometimes our motives are mixed. Sometimes we begin doing the right thing for reasons that are not entirely noble, and something changes in us as we continue doing it. Maimonides says something remarkable about this.

In his laws of *teshuvah*, he describes several practices of genuine repentance. Give *tzedakah*. Separate yourself from the behavior that caused harm. Change your actions. And then he says: Change your name. *Shinui hashem*. As though to say: **I am not the same person who did those things**. Maimonides is not suggesting that we go down to the courthouse tomorrow and legally change what people call us.

He is asking that we live differently enough that the name begins to mean something different. But Maimonides does not allow us to stop with the declaration. The behavior has to change. And that brings us to one of the most challenging passages we read on this very day.

The Haftarah for Yom Kippur morning comes from Isaiah, and it begins with people who are frustrated with God. “We fasted,” they say. “We humbled ourselves. Why haven’t You noticed?” And Isaiah’s answer is blunt. Because while they were fasting, they were still oppressing workers, quarreling, and treating other people unjustly. They had confused the act of fasting with the purpose of fasting. So God asks: “Is this the fast I desire?” And then Isaiah tells us what God does desire: loosen the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share your bread with the hungry, shelter those in need.

It is a remarkable passage to read while we ourselves are fasting. Isaiah is not saying the ritual does not matter. He is saying the ritual has failed if it changes nothing about the way we live. Prayer has to become action. Confession has to become repair. Fasting has to awaken us to the suffering of others. Otherwise, we have mistaken the means for the end. And that leaves us with a difficult Yom Kippur question: What will actually be different because we were here?

Heschel was one of the great Jewish theologians and moral voices of the twentieth century, a scholar who refused to separate spiritual life from moral responsibility. He wrote deeply about prayer, awe, the Sabbath, prophecy, and our relationship with God—but he also believed that religious faith had to show up in the world.

In March of 1965, Heschel went to Alabama. He marched from Selma toward Montgomery beside Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis and others seeking rights for Black Americans. When he returned home, Heschel tried to describe what that march had meant religiously. He wrote that their legs were not lips and walking was not kneeling, and yet the march itself had become worship. “I felt my legs were praying,” he wrote.

There comes a moment when the words must become actions. Not every one of us is called to march in Selma. But every one of us eventually reaches a place where what we say we believe and the way we actually live... meet.

Heschel was given a remarkable mind and a prophetic Jewish vocabulary. Eventually those gifts carried him to Alabama. The gift does not determine the good name. What we do with it matters.

There is an old story told about Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great nineteenth-century teacher of *mussar*, the Jewish discipline of ethical self-examination. One night he passed a shoemaker who was still working very late. The candle beside the shoemaker was almost burned down, and Rabbi Salanter asked why he was still working when there was so little light left. The shoemaker answered: “As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to repair.” Rabbi Salanter could not let go of those words. As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to repair. Yom Kippur asks what we will do with the time that remains.

There is one biblical verse I saved until now because I think we hear it differently after all of this. When God first calls Abraham, God promises: “I will bless you. I will make your name great. And you shall be a blessing.” At first glance, “I will make your name great” sounds almost like a promise of fame. But then comes the next phrase. *V’heyeh bracha*. “And you shall be a blessing.”

What does it mean for a human being to become a blessing? God's blessing of Abraham is not meant to stop with Abraham. Something is meant to pass through him into the world. Each of us decides where that blessing goes next.

All day today we ask God to remember our names. *Zochreinu l'chayim*. Remember us for life. *Kotveinu b'sefer hachayim*. Write us in the Book of Life. There is something deeply intimate about that image: our names, written before God. And I wonder whether one of the spiritual

tasks of Yom Kippur is not simply to ask God to write them again, but to ask what we hope those names will mean if we are given another year to carry them.

As Rabbi Israel Salanter's shoemaker understood, work can be done while there is still light. Tonight we will reach *Neilah*. The gates will begin to close. The shofar will sound. And then we will go home, carrying our names back into the world.

Earlier, I spoke of Dolly Parton and the extraordinary things people said when her life ended—not simply what she had accomplished, but what her name had come to mean: generosity, authenticity, kindness, blessing. Perhaps that is what each of us is writing, slowly, over the course of a lifetime—not merely a record of what we did, but the meaning our name carries into the lives of other people. And while the candle is still burning, may we do the work that is ours to do.

May our names carry something worthy into the world. May the blessing God has placed in our lives not end with us. And may we, in ways large or small, become what Abraham was asked to become: a blessing.

G'mar chatimah tovah.