

# Yom Kippur with Morrie — A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

**Yom Kippur 5761**

**Temple Valley Beth Shalom Encino, CA**

**October 9, 2000**

*(This is a transcription of an audio recording which can be found at [www.schulweisinstitute.com](http://www.schulweisinstitute.com))*

Rabbi Schulweis: How many of you read the book, *The Tuesdays with Morrie*? Good, it's amazing, it should happen to my book it should happen to your book. I read it, and matter of fact I had six copies that the members of my congregation gave to me because they are very interested in educating a rabbi.

When I put down this slender little book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I felt, I must admit to you, a double sadness. First of all, I felt very sad for this young man whose life was ravaged by ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease. And I was saddened because, I felt, I must tell you that Judaism and the synagogue had lost Morrie. We lost Morrie and we lost his children because the book fairly oozes with Jewishness. And yet, it is the most distant from Judaism itself – distant from the synagogue and the question was why.

I can't talk about Morrie Schwartz because I know Morrie Schwartz. Not personally but he, his neshamah and his mishpochah was just like mine. Actually, Morrie had the same background that my father had. Morrie was raised in that kind of a home - child of East European immigrants, Jews, secular Jews, ethnic Jews, cultural Jews, Yiddishist Jews, socialist Jews, but not religious Jews. My father was like that. My father never was a member of a synagogue and my father despised rabbis.

All his life, when he would see a rabbi, he would mutter under his breath, fanatish. You know what fanatish is? Fanatical. Morrie and I were lundsmen. And when I read the book, I recognized right away he was raised in my neighborhood. On Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, in a one-bedroom apartment in a red brick building near an Italian beer garden. And his stepmother, Eva, would sing songs to him the very same songs that my mother would sing to me. Like, for example, one that you all know: “koyft zhe, koyft zhe papirosn, trukene fun regn nisht fargozn.” You understand Yiddish by the way? If you know you're going to have a terrible time with this whole [inaudible 00:03:37].

You know that these songs were not religious songs. None of the songs that my mother sang to me were religious songs, they were all songs from the Yiddish stage. They were secular songs; they were folk songs. This one, “papirosn,” which means cigarettes; she's selling cigarettes. And it is a song about this destitute woman who is

hungry and alone and she's selling cigarettes in the rain and she's crying for support. But the important thing is the language in which she sang, her song, in the language which my mother sang songs was Yiddish. And Yiddish is not Hebrew. Yiddish is not like any other language. Yiddish is Mama Loshen. And Mama Loshen means just that. It has the softness of a mother's tongue. And Yiddish is related to something broader, and that is Yiddishkeit.

Now many of you don't know what Yiddishkeit is because you are raised from a different background. I give you part of my background.

See Yiddishkeit is not Judaism. Judaism conventionally refers to the synagogue, it refers to the prayer book, it refers to liturgy, it refers to reconstructionism or reform or conservative or orthodox. My father's home knew nothing of such denominationalism. Yiddishkeit in my home was a world of ethics, ethnicity, folk culture, idealism for die massen. You know what die massen is? The masses. It means proletarian Jews. You don't find many proletarian Jews in Encino. I'm looking for a proletarian Jew, just for nostalgic sake. Now they are all very different people. But in my home, we were concerned with der poshiter Yid, the simple Jew, the poor Jew, the common Jew, der arbater. It is a very important word in our vocabulary.

Der arbater is the worker. And a synonym for Yiddishkeit was menschlichkeit. And menschlichkeit means humaneness, it means decency, it means kindness and in a vocabulary that I have picked up in my father's home and my mother's home were words like yoisher. You know what yoisher is? Justice. That's right, justice, fairness, rachmanis, pity, mitzvah. Not mitzvah the way my orthodox grandfather meant it. Mitzvah for him was a commandment by God which you are to follow. But in my father's house, two mighanitzeh, had nothing to do with God. It had to do with relationship of doing something decent with somebody else.

Morrie, like my Papa, was raised in the era of depression. I don't mean psychological depression; that's only for rich people. In my day, depression meant, depression people were too done, depressed economically to be concerned about psychological issues. My father, grandfather, none of these people went to a psychologist, a psychiatrist. But on his deathbed, Morrie tells the author, he remembers looking for a job in the fur factory where his father worked. And he described the factory with the walls were closed in around them – a room dark and hot, the windows covered with filth, the machines churning like train wheels, fur hairs flying, leaving a thickened air and the workers sewing their pelts together bent over their needles and the boss marching up and down, up and down saying, “Faster, faster, faster!”

Morrie says to his, on his deathbed, that that was one of the things that I would never do for a living. I would never be able to make my living through the sweat of other

people. And that's why, in another word, which is a Yiddish word, sort of a Yiddishized word, which you many know, but that was called on my home, exploitazia. Exploitazia means just that, means exploitation.

Yiddishkeit, the culture of Yiddish as I say, was not expressed in the synagogue. My father never used the synagogue. But it was expressed in something else: Yiddish poetry, Yiddish art, Yiddish music, Yiddish dance, Yiddish classics.

You think that the fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, right? Not to my father. To my father, there were only three fathers: Mendele Mocher Seformim, Shalom Aleichen and Icchok Lejbusz Peretz. And into my home, there came all kinds of newspapers, Yiddish newspapers: Der Tog, the Morgan Journal, Der Forvetz, never the Frayhayt. The Frayhayt was a communist Yiddish newspaper.

And my father and my mother took me to plays. Yiddish plays that was my upbringing, written by Shalom Asch and Peretz Hirschbein and David Pinski and great artists like Maurice Schwartz and Muni Weisenfreud who later on became Paul Muni, and Ludwig Satz and Molly Picon.

My home was Jewish. My dog was Jewish. Do you have a dog, you call a dog, Rover or Spot or Prince or King? My dog was was called, "Ropchik". You laugh because Ropchik was a very important character in one of Shalom Aleichen's very important stories. Ropchik was the little dog, the weakest dog, the smallest dog, the last to receive a scrap of meat from the butcher. All the other dogs were like pitbulls, strong dogs, powerful dogs. They all beat out Ropchik. But Ropchik represented the oppressed, proletariat of my people.

Papa did not send me, as I say, to Yeshivah to study with rabbis because my father, like Morrie's, had different heroes. The heroes of my father was Chayim Zhitlovsky, Karalnik, David Dubinsky, Sidney Hellman. The great organizers of the ILGWU.

Papa's heroes were not rabbis. My father, as I said, I guess it must be on my mind because he never could warm up to rabbis. Ironically, my father in later years, came to this shore, and he had to suffer his son's attraction to the rabbinate. Forgive me, Papa. Didn't know what I was doing.

My father sent me to place for Jewish culture. Not Yeshiva but a Yiddish school there were many of them. Some of you may remember them: Natsionaler Arbeter Farband, Shalom Aleichen schule, Arbeter ring schule, Yiddishist schulz and schulz and schools in which there were no classes in prayer. Never. Nor there was any reference to the Mishnah or the Gemorah. And there was absolutely no God talk. These are the same people who to they act so nervous whenever Senator Lieberman talks about God and

faith. Because my people thought of it as goyish. Jews don't talk about God and faith.

Morrie considered himself an agnostic. My father was an agnostic too. He was not an atheist because he wasn't that sure. [laughter 00:10:54]. But he considered himself an agnostic. And you remember that Morrie did not want to have a traditional funeral. He instructed his family to have him cremated, and then he added in typical Yiddish humor, "Make sure they don't overcook me".

When Ted Koppel, another Jew, very much like Morrie by the way, TV host of ABC's *Nightline*, interviews Morrie, Morrie turned to Koppel, himself a Jew, and said to him, "Tell me something about your faith." Faith. And Koppel is taken aback. He is nonplussed. He is embarrassed and he answers rather stiffly, "I usually don't talk about such things with people I've only known a few minutes." For God's sake, he's talking to a man who is dying. He's talking about his incontinence – his difficulty with taking care of himself physically. And so Morrie presses on. He says, "Ted, I'm dying and I don't have a lot of time." So Ted Koppel laughs and he says, "All right then. Faith. Faith." And then quotes a line from Marcus Aurelius.

Now, I love Marcus Aurelius. I love stoic philosophy, don't we all? But something was wrong here so I began to think about Morrie. Not only because he is such a loveable eccentric individual, but because there are tens of thousands of native born Jews like Morrie who call themselves cultural Jews, beat the more time, a secular Jews. But they are so estranged from Judaism.

In 1990, when the National Jewish population study was published, it recorded the response of a huge number of native born Jews, 1.2 million who when asked, "What is your religion?" answered, "None." My father would have said the same thing, so would Morrie. Not that they were ashamed of being a Jewish, but not religious.

Now, I love Morrie. And as I read the book, over and over again. And I said that's my family. I know them very less my Papa. These are the children of the immigrants – tailors, peddlers, cloak makers, cigar workers, hat makers, painters and they are wonderful people. People of tremendous chein, great charm, people with great compassion and moral sensibility and universalists and humanists. And then I felt so sad because I felt that terrible disconnect – the tremendous chasm, the rapture, between Yiddishkeit, which I love, and Judaism, which I love. But the two were not connected. There is no connection whatsoever between the human conscience, the Jewish conscience of Morrie and Judaism itself. Nothing at all between the home and the synagogue.

So, at the end of the book, I was very saddened because I felt some responsibility. And I think the synagogue bears some responsibility for the loss of Morrie and for his

children. They are not here by the way. Not only that, in this shul synagogue either. At best, there are 40% Jews who are affiliated with something of a synagogue religious nature. Most of them are not. And I said to myself, was there nobody in the synagogue, no rabbi, no teacher, who is able to connect Yiddishkeit with the soul of Judaism? For example, at the end of his book, he's dying and so he's going to talk a lot about death. And I read what he said about death and I said, "Anybody in the Hebrews school, anybody in the schule, tell him about the ethics of Jewish mourning?" And I wrote furiously on the margins of the book, it's a small little book but in my book, it's huge. I wrote there and I put down something which I wanted Morrie's children, maybe, to read. I put down, Moed Katan. It's a Gemorah, a wonderful Talmudic passage. And what I want to do is just let it talk for itself. I'm not going to embellish it but I just want you to know what Morrie was never told. What Morrie's children don't know until today on the ethics of mourning. Let me tell you exactly how it begins:

"Our rabbis taught Ba rishonah: In the beginning, formerly, they used to carry food to the house of mourning, the rich in silver and gold baskets and the poor in baskets of willow twigs. And the poor felt ashamed so they made it institution. The rabbis instituted the tradition that all should carry food to the mourners in baskets of twigs. Why? Out of respect for the poor. They used to serve wine drinks in the house of mourning to cheer up the people. It says in the Gemorah, the rich in white glass vessels and the poor in colored glasses. And the poor people were ashamed. And so they instituted, the rabbis, a tradition that all should be served drinks in colored glasses. Out of respect for the poor.

"Ba rishonah" In former times, they would uncover the face of the rich and cover the face of the poor when they carry them on litters to the funeral was all open. Nothing was closed. The reason that they covered the face of the poor is because they had turned purpled, blue, livid throughout the lives of the drought. And the poor were ashamed. And therefore, the law was instituted that all of the faces of the deceased, the rich and the poor, were to be covered. Out of respect for the poor.

Formerly, the expense of taking the dead out to his burial fell hard on the next of kin. Here they were exposed on a litter. If you are a poor person, you put on the deceased torned and ragged, tattered clothes. And the people would run away out of embarrassment, because the poor were ashamed. So there rose a Rabbi Gamliel. Rabbi Rabbanan Gamliel, himself a wealthy man, who ordered that he should be buried in flaxen, linen vestments rather than in woolen vestments. And nowadays, all the world follows the practices of being buried in simple linen tachrichin shrouds so that the poor shall not be shamed.

Do you think Morrie ever heard this? Morrie never heard it. You know what Morrie heard? And Morrie's children also. This is how it's done, this is when it's done, this is

where it's done, but don't say anything about why.

Where is the poetry? Where is the ethics? Where is the philosophy of all of this? He is told that the casket has to remain closed. Closed. That you can't walk around looking at the deceased. But he never was told why. He never was told that it was out of a deep religious humanistic respect of a human being. Because when that casket is opening, you'll look into that casket, you become a voyeur. You become a spectator. And the deceased becomes an object, a commodity, a thing someone who is seen but who does not see.

There is an ethics in Jewish religious ritual. Morrie is never told that. He is told that he have to do the burial right away. He knows that, because somebody told him. In Judaism, you're buried right away. What's the rush? Because rabbi said so. So, does the rabbi have a reason? I'll tell you why. But it is a very important matter. It's based upon a verse, it's a radical verse and a radical explanation.

In Deuteronomy 21, in the Torah we read, that if a man is found guilty and sentenced to death, "the body shall not hang all night. It is a reproach to God. The body must be buried on the same day."

Why? Listen to the parable, to the audacity of the parable. Listen to the philosophy of the parable. The parable is there was once a king, and he had a twin brother. And they look so close to each other that they were almost indiscernible difference. And the king's brother went out on evil ways and he was hanged on a tree. And people would pass by and they said, "Look the king is dead." Therefore, we do not let the body remain overnight but bury the deceased immediately.

Understand the philosophy. Who is the king? The king is God. And who is the twin brother of God? The human being. And therefore, it is a desecration. It is a shame to God to see this kind of capital punishment – this kind of defamation. When a human being dies and is unburied, God is defaced because life is holy. Or as my Yiddish ancestors would say, "Der mensch iz heylig." That is the religious ground of Morrie's humanism.

You say to him, you know we discouraged flowers. What's the matter with these Jews? They have no aesthetic sensibility? Why do you discourage flowers at the funeral? But we have to understand the tradition that the way in which you honor the deceased is by using the money that you would use for flowers to add fragrance to the life of the poor, the homeless, the filthy, the sick. We honored the dead by elevating the living, "One must be sparing with Jewish money."

So I read the book and I'm going angrier and angrier. It's a little book that he's talking

there about the mindless materials of the world. I want to see a single reference to the bible, to Pirkei Avot, to Hasidic tradition, to the Talmud, to something. Nothing at all. But doesn't he understand that Judaism of the synagogue understands this need to struggle against the golden calf.

You know the Shofar? The Shofar that is covered with gold is pasul. You can't use a Shofar that has a gold piece because the Shevarim, the quivering note that call for justice is not muffled by the gold mouthpiece of the Shofar. When the high priest walks into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, what's the first thing he has to do? Strip himself of the gold and the silver vestments and wear linen clothing because silver and gold cannot atone for transgressions.

On the eve of Sabbath, the Jewish custom is to search one's clothing – to remove any coins from the clothing before the Sabbath. Because on the Sabbath we mean to break off our relations with the pocket.

Israel Salanter. Did you ever hear of Israel Salanter? Heard about Marcus Aurelius and not Israel Salanter? Why? Israel Salanter was one of the great great rabbinic minds. He taught his students the laws about a blitztrop. You what a blitztrop is? Blitztrop is, “if you find a speck of blood in a fertilized egg, you can't eat it,” said Israel Salanter. He said, “I want you to know this law does not apply only to eggs. If you take money in which you find the blood of the exploitation of workers, it is treif.” What makes you think that treif and culture has only to do with food? It has to do with the money.

Why did Morrie hear this? Morrie's children are told to fast and I meet some of them. And I say, “Why are you going to fast? Is it some sort of, you know, some sort of an ascetic from the rabbis?” And I tell them, “You fast and I want their children to learn to fast because you want to soften their hearts, because they never lived the day without hunger.” They never lived a day without thirst. But they fast today, not to die at the body, but to feel the pains of hunger – the faintness that of poverty that visited on millions and millions of people in this world who go to bed without a meal.

So why do you pray? And how do you pray? Morrie never heard it. What he heard, he heard. You know what upgebeld is? Oh you don't know Yiddish, my God! You know it means, I don't know, what it mean? It means just like what it sounds like a babbling, a babbling kind of, it's a mechanical wrote kind of prayer. But Morrie listened to the prophet Isaiah: “When you spread forth your hands I will hide My eyes from you. Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean, put aside the evil of your doings before Mine eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

He didn't get this from Spinoza – who did not like rachmones at all – who didn't believe

in compassion. He didn't get it from Marcus Aurelius. He didn't get it from Kant. He didn't get it from Karl Marx. He didn't get it from Friedrich Engels. He didn't get it from Ludwig Feuerbach. It comes from the Torah, in the sweet little verse in Exodus: "And if you take your neighbors close to pledge, you shall deliver it to him by the time the sun goes down. For that is his only covering for his skin – bameh yishkav." How shall he sleep?

Morrie, he speak about universalism. What was he got if from Fichte? He got it from Hegel? Let me tell you where he got it from. Where we shouldn't have gotten it from. And why the synagogue fails because the synagogue fails to connect Yiddishkeit and Judaism. From Malachi, "Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another?" From Job, "Did not the One who made me in the womb make him?"

His passion for peace. His passion for reconciliation, for international peace. Where did he get it from? Where shouldn't he have gotten it from? He should have gotten it from Isaiah, the 19th chapter in the schule we read it. It was the only schule in the world that reads this chapter on half Torah. You may not know it because you may not be there. Take my word, it's done. It's that remarkable 8th century before the common era prophet who, while in Egypt and Assyria are raging against Israel spoke these words in the name of God: "Blessed be My people Egypt, and the work of My hands Assyria, and Israel, Mine inheritance."

Yiddishkeit. My Yiddishkeit died. I'm witnessed to this. My Yiddish schule died. The Yiddish press died. Yiddish drama died. It had no sustaining, staying power because it had lost its roots. You take away the culture, the moral and ethical culture of Judaism, it's ethics and it's ritual, and you desecrate Yiddishkeit.

So I mourn for Morrie. I read that book with great sorrow. That Morrie's funeral, there was no Kaddish, there was no El Moleh, there was no shivah, there was no minyan, there was no community, there was no continuity. Morrie's children are loved. Why do I know them? They are all around me. All around me. And they call themselves cultural Jews – bereft of language, bereft of religious culture, bereft of holidays, of holy days. Theirs have become a stomach culture. An occasional yearning for lox and bagels. Yiddishkeit has been reduced to a way of eating. It's Jackie Mason, that's it. It's Boschveld, that's it.

Morrie's children are wonderful people. I know them. God, I know them, love them. They were without passion, or without knowledge. They're not haters, they're neither nor Jews, they're not believers, they're not atheists, they're not Zionists and anti-Zionists, they're not socialists, they're not capitalists. They are what my Zada would call in Yiddish, Benclayim, sort of a hybrid across between a chicken and a rabbit – nisht ahin un nisht aher . It's one of those strange, strange. It's not their fault. It's our fault.

It's my fault.

Maybe Alison's fault too. I mean it seriously. It's our fault. If not Alison's, then certainly Feinstein's but he's not here. Yeah that's right. Skip that. It's Feinstein's fault, go tell him. It's my fault, it's Feinstein's fault because they're not here. And I want them here, not because I crave their membership but because I feel that we have lost them to pride of these remarkable human beings. I know them well. They all went to city college, they were the New York intellectuals, they were the Erving crystals and the Erving house and the Marus Raphael Cohens. And it's too bad because I want their participation in our ethical action. I'd want them to belong here because, you know, they don't even know it's going to be a rally.

You know why they don't know? Because you got to be in shul in order to know what's going on. How else are you going to reach the people? But if they are not, they don't know. I want their children here. I want them to know the beauty of Jewish volunteerism. I want them to know the poetry of Psalms and the passion of Jeremiah, and the wisdom of The Ethics of the Fathers and the logic of the Talmud and the song of Hasidism.

I mourn for Morrie. Morrie deserves a better end and his children deserve a better beginning. You know we have to be concerned about all of us, not just me but you too because you are responsible for Morrie. You may even know some Morries. You don't know any Morries? Let me introduce you to some.

When you split Yiddishkeit from Judaism, ethics from ethnicity, social action from prayer, love of humanity from love of your people, it destroys. It destroy the uniqueness, the wholeness of Judaism itself.

So what I'm asking for is the following, both end. I'm asking you to bring Morrie here. If not Morrie, Morrie's children and not Morrie's children's children. By the way, you got to come too. That's the trick; the little trick there which I never realized.

You got to bring, there's no excuse. There's no excuse that I got a fairly good memory but you are taxing my memory. I got to remember you from one Rosh Hashannah to another.

Give me a break. Come once, twice, three times during Sabbath services. Come to a care of program we have this year. Every single night: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, classes in Hebrew, in Mishnah, in Gemorah, in Bible.

We lost too many people. We can't afford the hémorragie. And we lost them because they came to this shore, they never heard the connection. They never saw this unity.

Above this endowment, war that Avery spoke about is going to be, with this I conclude.

A sentence from the prophet Joel. I love this sentence: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions.” It's the last line of the last prophet of Malachi: . “And God shall turn the heart of the parents to the children and the heart of the children to their parents.”

Yizkor for Morrie. Keep them in mind when you recite your Yizkor – for your father and for your mother. I do, whenever I recite it for my Papa and for my Mama. I remember Yizkor for Morrie.

May God bless us with healing. May God bless us with a reuniting of Yiddishkeit and Judaism. Amen.