

D'var Haftarah for Yom Kippur Morning 5775
Ohef Sholom Temple
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Put meaning into what you do – not everything is a to-do list item to be checked off.

My father, Boyd Briskin, is now in home hospice, very close to the end of his battle with Stage Four Colon Cancer which has spread to the rest of his body. He is so weak that he sleeps for hours at a time and can only manage to shuffle from the bed to the bathroom and to his easy chair, and the disease and its treatment have taken away his appetite and the appeal of food. Fortunately, Tammy, my brother Randy and I got to visit him earlier this week, to bring him some smiles. Some of those smiles came from my sitting in a chair next to him, as we called out Jeopardy answers to Alex Trebek. We found meaning in spending time together according to his level of energy. The most meaningful memories we made came from a musical jam session we held on the last night we were there.

My parents were founding and active members of the Riverside Folk Song Society for more than 50 years. This meant that my parents and brother and I, along with a group of others, spent every Thanksgiving weekend since before I was born, at Camp O-ongo in the San Bernardino Mountains for a retreat full of music, laughter, ping-pong, and memories my whole family has cherished. Another one of the co-founders of the society, Chet Roistacher, is an active now-90-year-old

who plays mandolin and has an aura of Pete Seeger. Chet came to visit my dad and family on Tuesday evening before we left for the airport in the middle of the night. When he brought out the mandolin, my dad asked for his harmonicas. I picked up a guitar. My feeble father led the band by blowing out tunes like Oh Susanna, Edelweiss, Turkey in the Straw, and Sunrise, Sunset. We did our best to keep up with him. Normally he needs to go back to sleep after fifteen minutes of being present for guests, but the music and the company kept him going for over an hour. At the end, I kissed him goodbye, for one last time.

It could have been just a final visit. We made it meaningful and important. It was more than singing and playing familiar tunes – it became a hootenanny. [...] "Ha-lo zeh tzom ev-cha-rei-hu?" the Haftarah asks us this morning. "Is not this the fast I have chosen?" – to pursue justice, to release the bound, to feed the hungry, to live your life as a mensch, a good person? Otherwise, we are likely to just go through the motions of fasting and going to services with no change to our behavior. These lessons are not just about how to fast on Yom Kippur – they are good life practices. We have many opportunities to add meaning to what we're doing – to really make it count. Take Isaiah's advice: don't just go through the motions – make the connection to other people and to your spiritual self, and embrace the meaning in it. Isaiah's teaching is to do things with purpose, not merely show up.

Tzom Kal, may your fast continue to be easy, because we need our strength for making meaningful connections.