



Fair Trade Congregations

Kol Nidre Sermon on Fair Trade Coffee

Zochranu Lechayim

by Rabbi Elliot Salo Schoenberg

Alfred Nobel was a Swedish chemist who held 355 patents, owned gold mines, and is best known as the inventor of dynamite. He was an excellent business man who manufactured armaments in 90 factories around the world. He was one of the wealthiest men of the 19th century when he died. In 1888, eight years before his actual death, he read a premature obituary that summarized his life. The newspaper had mistaken the death of his brother and business partner Ludvig for Alfred's own death. The French newspaper obituary declared "*Le marchand de la mort est mort*" ("The merchant of death is dead"). It went on to say that "Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday." Alfred Nobel was shocked. He grew deeply concerned about how he would be remembered. What would his legacy be?

He wrote a will that turned his assets into a foundation that became the Noble Institute so he would be remembered as a philanthropist, pacifist, and the creator of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Alfred Nobel asked, *zochranu lechayim* ("remember us for life"). How do I want to be remembered for this life?

The liturgy of the High Holiday demands from us *zochranu lechayim*; how do we wish to be remembered for this life?

How does this story resonate with you? For me it is important and it is moving. This man embarked on a deep, personal reflection process on his own and turned his life around.

I applaud Nobel for his teshuva and yet on another level, it does not satisfy me personally. We are ordinary people, not men and women of great wealth; not heroes but ordinary people. This tale of legacy leaves me asking, "without great wealth, without great achievement, what legacy will I leave?" What legacy will you leave to others? It is hard to imagine one dramatic moment or one dramatic act that I will do that will leave a lasting impression or change the world.

Here is where the liturgy of High Holidays helps us. In the *Amidah*, *zochranu lechayim* is followed by the verse *cotvanu besefer hachayim*. Our rabbis understood *zochranu lechayim* ("remember us for life"), to be ordinary acts like eating, drinking, or earning a living. They understood *cotvanu besefer hachayim* ("write us into the book of life") to mean extraordinary acts that merited entry into *beolam habah* ("the world to come"), like leaving a million dollars to charity, changing careers, writing a best seller, or rushing into a burning building to save someone. *Zochranu* is this world, *cotvanu* is the world to come. Two distinct verses, two distinct notions, ordinary and extraordinary, that inhabit two parallel universes.

Yet other commentators suggest there is another way to read this High Holyday interpolation. *Cotvanu* is a commentary; modifying *zochranu*. The first verse asks how will you be remembered? The second verse answers by teaching that one must imbue everyday ordinary events with extra ordinary strength, courage or hope. How are we to be written into the book of life? How do we want to be remembered? I suggest it is with everyday events that have eternal significance.

A 1732 book called *Kav HaYashar* tells the story of a tailor in the Lithuanian city of Brisk:

The tailor left instructions for the *Chevra Kadisha*, the Burial Society. They were to construct his casket from his workbench. Into the casket, the Society was to place his tape measure he used for measuring clothing. When they asked the tailor why he had left these instructions, he answered that he wanted his workbench and his tape measure to be two faithful witnesses to testify before God that he was always honest and that he never cheated a customer in all his years of work.

How did this simple ordinary Jew wish to be remembered? *Zochranu lechayim*, for his daily acts of honesty. He had a true understanding of his legacy, in which our ordinary deeds create an enduring reputation. Greatness is not reserved for the famous; immortality does not demand dramatic achievement or front-page headlines.

Every time we drink a cup of Fair Trade coffee we can start the day with an act of righteousness. When we drink Fair Trade coffee, we can taste the hint of plum or cherry because it is good quality coffee. More importantly, it builds a school in Uganda and empowers women in Ecuador. When we drink Fair Trade coffee, we are also fighting human trafficking. When we drink Fair Trade coffee, we are being good stewards of the earth reducing the amount of pesticides being planted in our environment.

This world has massive problems including the lack of safe and healthy working conditions, problems of child labor, and problems of abusing the environment. These issues are huge, worldwide, and can feel overwhelming and beyond our reach for solutions.

Dear friends, let us start small, with an everyday act that will have an enduring impact. Let's start with not just coffee but a **just cup of coffee**.

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Sam Chiel, of Temple Emanuel in Newton, MA, used to share this story:

Bernie Molish ran the elevator in an East Side co-op for 25 years in New York City. In the 1980's the New York Times reported on his celebration. When tenants went away he watered their plants, he once saved a cat from a ledge, he tasted cooking to see if it was good enough for dinner guests. One tenant said, "the most amazing thing about Bernie is he always smiles." Bernie responded, "you have to; a smile sets the tone for the whole elevator." He shared their joys and their sorrows. Bernie visited the tenants in the hospital and attended their funerals. A woman who knew Bernie for all 25 years said, "an elevator man does not just run the elevator, he is the backbone of the community."

Bernie understood that simple, everyday acts can have an enduring impact on the community.

Zochranu lechayim, this year may we be remembered for the ordinary tasks we carried out in extraordinary ways.

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