FIVE MINUTES TO LIVE
A sermon inspired by the sermon and legacy of Rabbi Kenny Berger (z'l)
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC

I would really like to just talk and share these thoughts with you tonight without notes, without anything - a podium - a pulpit between us, but I'm not that sure of my text, as its not entirely mine and I respect its words so much that I'm going to have to refer to them a bit.

First a bit of background and context.

When I awoke to the tragedy of the Ukrainian Airlines flight crashing with all 176 souls on board plummeting to their death my heart sank, as I know yours did too.

In the midst of what has seemed like a relentless stretch of tragic events on a human scale I thought

of a story I once heard from my rabbi about another plane crash and perhaps the most important sermon ever told. I think of this story and that sermon every time I learn of a tragedy like a plane crash – so this was not new to me, but I realize that I have not shared it with you or anyone and that's a different kind of tragedy as its message is so important it should be every sermon I give.

First here's the story, the story of the rabbi who wrote the most important sermon ever told. It's a true story.

Thirty years ago when I was a teenager at Bnai Birth Perlman Camp in Starlight Pennsylvania, my camp Rabbi, Rabbi Bruce Aft who will be here as our scholar in February, he was one of the rabbis that spoke at Judah's Bar Mitzvah; gathered all of the

teens together with tears in his eyes to tell us the tragic news of a passenger plane crash that involved his friend and colleague Rabbi Kenny Berger.

In the midst of his flowing tears he told us of how the plane carrying 112 souls including his friend Kenny, was travelling to Chicago from Denver; they were returning from a family vacation.

At this point a few details had emerged about the crash and he shared them with us. We learned that the plane's tail engine had exploded en-route, crippling the controls, and for 40 minutes, the passengers prepared for a crash landing.

The rabbi's wife, Aviva, fainted from the shock. Rabbi Berger reached across the seats and gathered the hands of his daughter Avigail, 16, and son

Jonathan, 9, trying to reassure them. The plane burst into flames after it hit the ground in Sioux City, Iowa, killing 112 people, including the rabbi and his wife, both in their early 40s. Avigail and Jonathan miraculously survived and that's how we know the details of those final moments.

Why was Rabbi Aft telling us, this group of Jewish teenagers at summer camp this story?
In part it was to remember and memorialize his friend, the grieve with us and for us to help him grieve.

But the other reason, and this is where the most important sermon ever told comes in was that three years before the crash Rabbi Berger had delivered a sermon on Yom Kippur to his congregation that contained just the words that my rabbi and all of us

needed to hear in that moment. In the shadow of the Ukrainian airlines flight, one that touches Canada and BC most particularly they are the words we need to hear now too.

On Yom Kippur 1986 the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy was fresh in the minds of his congregants. He titled his sermon, “Five Minutes to Live”.

In his sermon Rabbi Berger focused on one particular detail of the Challenger explosion, the revelation that the seven astronauts had remained alive for the 65,000-foot fall to the ocean.

He told his congregation on that Yom Kippur morning:

“At first, it was though that all seven astronauts had died immediately, at the moment of the explosion.

Now, it was discussed, that death had only come when the capsule hit the water. For perhaps as much as five minutes, the astronauts were alive and conscious and yet knew that death was certain.”[1]

Rabbi Berger continued: “The thought terrorizes me. Can you imagine knowing that in a few moments death was imminent? What would we think of? If God forbid, you and I were in such circumstances? What would go through our mind? What went through their minds? The seven astronauts.

[1] https://www.sdiworld.org/sites/default/files/educational-event/five-minutes-to-live-rabbi-kenneth-berger-z22l-yom-kippur-sermon-sept-1986%20%282%29.pdf

Rabbi Berger then asked the looming question, embedded in the title of his sermon, the question that would later tragically be a foretelling of Rabbi Berger's own tragic death.

"What if I had five minutes to live?"

Rabbi Berger offered three possible responses to that question, and he pointed out that they all begin with the words, IF ONLY!

Quoting now from his sermon:

[The] first response in that moment:

If only I had known when I said goodbye to my loved ones…the very last goodbye!

I want to read you an except from a beautiful story of holocaust literature entitled The Kiss by Yaffa Eliach. These are the Rebbe's own words.

I had a foreign passport from a South American country. It was a passport for myself. My rebbetzin, of blessed memory, and for a young child. But when I received the passport, it was too late. There was no longer a rebbetzin and my beloved grandson, as well as my daughter and son-in-law, were all gone too. Upon receiving the passport, I realized that I had the opportunity to save two Jewish souls, a middle-aged women and a young child. When this became known, about forty children were brought to me by their parents. Little boys crying and begging to be saved. They promised to be good and not to be a burden to me. How could I choose? I told the Jewish

leaders that I was returning to my apartment and that they should bring me a child.

Two days later a father came with a small son, aged six, "I am Perlberger", he introduced himself. Then he went on: "Rebbe, I am giving you my child. God should help you so that you should be able to save my son." He bent down, kissed the child on his head and said, "Shraga, from this moment on, this Jew standing here next to you is your father."

That kiss I can't forget. Wherever I go, that kiss follows me all my life. Before he shut the door behind him, the father took one more lingering look at his son. Then I heard the echo of his painful steps as he descended the stairs. God helped us. The boy and I managed to survive Bergen-Belsen together. Despite many difficulties, I studied with him every

single day in camp, with God's help, we were liberated by the American Army on a death train on Rosh Chodesh Iyar, April 13, 1945.

The Rebbe concludes his story by saying "All the time, the echo of that kiss that little Shraga received on his forehead resounds in my ears." I see before my eyes a father bending and kissing his beloved son and pointing to me and saying "From now on this man is your father".

The last line in the story was:

This last kiss of a father to his son, follows me all of my life.

My friends, the father knew this was the last kiss. Can you imagine the love, the warmth, the tenderness that went into that last kiss. Maybe in a

way he was lucky. He knew. The astronauts could not have known, if only, if only they knew. In a very real sense, none of us know the time of our last kiss. My kids come in and kiss me before they leave for school. I kiss Aviva before I leave for the Shul. Who knows what lies ahead, what tomorrow will bring? That one kiss, each kiss, must be with as much love and concern as possible."

His second IF ONLY response:

"If only I had another chance, I would do things differently."

A life without regrets, if only we had another chance we would have acted differently, spoken differently.

The burden that must weigh on the soul if in the last five minutes of life we are laden with regret? You

can’t do anything about it in the last five minutes but we can do something about it now, in the next five minutes.

We can quit the job, buy the boat, take the trip, its bucket list items but the list doesn’t end there. We can say the loving, compassionate words we are withholding for our own good but self-harmful reasons. We can do t’shuvah, mend a relationship. We can do tzedakah and give back a blessing for all that we have taken and that which we have been given by others.

His third IF ONLY response:

> If only I realized, what I had when I had it.

Quoting again from Rabbi Berger’s sermon:

“One important part of our lives we so often neglect is appreciation of our spouses. Spouses often after years of marriage become such strangers to each other. I am reminded of the play by Ionesco "The Bald Soprano" about a man and a woman who meet on a train as apparent strangers.

In polite conversations, they discover they have an awful lot in common. They both live in the same town, same building, the same apartment. They both have a daughter named Alice, seven years old, with one blue and one green eye. It is not long before they discover to their astonishment, and the astonishment of the audience that they are husband and wife and have been married for some fifteen years.

Yes, there is exaggeration here, but there is also "Subtle Truth." How many couples live together for years but stop sensing the other's joy, the other's frustrations: They no longer hear the cry of urgency, the pain – they just go through life day after day, month after month, year after year. Strangers to each other.

Rabbi Berger went on to expand the circle of neglect and lack of appreciation to our children, our own parents, our physical bodies.

I thought of this over the holiday break when I was in San Francisco for my parent's 160th birthday party. My dad just turned 80, my mom Gd willing will in February.

I gave my parents a lot of grief when I was a kid, yes I am sure I gave them nachas as well, but I also gave monosyllabic answers, I was too busy to go with them on an errand or sit with them after dinner. We didn't have cell phones back then but we had walkmen and I could similarly put my headphones on and tune them out by tuning into my music.

As I sat there with my siblings, our spouses, our children, my parents, both in remarkably good health I looked around the room and saw their aging friends. I saw the spouses who sat alone; predeceased by their soulmate. I noted the family members of my own family who because of years of estrangement could not bring themseleves to attend the function.

If anyone ever asks would you rather have more money or more time, always answer “more time”. More time to appreciate what you have before its gone.

Rabbi Berger gave us all a gift 30 years ago, he gave it to himself, a message that resonates with the tragedy of the moment, the most important sermon ever told, three responses to if only

If only I knew it was my last goodbye,
if only I appreciated what I had,
if only I had done it differently.

To quote the powerful conclusion of Rabbi Berger’s sermon: “If only I. If only I. . . and then the capsule hits the water, it's all over. Then you realize it's all

the same – 5 minutes, 5 days, 5 years, 50 years. It's all the same for it is over before we realize.”

The shuttle astronauts had 5 minutes, Rabbi Berger 40 minutes, the passengers of Ukrainian Airlines maybe only seconds. Its all the same, the only time we have is right now. To quote Alice Morse Earle “Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present. ”