What If…?
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Have you ever played the game "What If"? "What If"? is a rather simple game, with really only one rule to guide its play. To play the game "What If?" the player examines a period or person of historical significance and merely asks the question "What If?"

In his most recent book The Plot Against America, Philip Roth plays the "What If Game" when he imagines a United States in which Charles Lindbergh storms the deadlocked 1940 Republican Convention, upsets Wendell Wilkie for the nomination, then barnstorms the nation in a novel election campaign that ousts FDR from the White House. Vote for Lindbergh or Vote for War serves as the victorious campaign slogan. Slowly, but unavoidably, U.S. isolationist policy grows stronger after it signs a non aggression pact with Germany and Japan. Britain grows weaker, and Lindbergh's cabinet and the Republican congress enact a series of laws that cause no small bit of consternation in America's Jewish community. You'll have to read the book to see how this alternative history unfolds, but imagine how the world would have been different with no FDR, no Pearl Harbor and the US on the other side in World War II? Because of one event, the election of 1940 the whole world, not to mention the lives of 6 million Jews could have been dramatically different.

Another example, this one more recent, and one that I have been thinking about for the past 10 years. What if Yitzak Rabin had not been assassinated? What if he left the peace rally in what is now Yitzak Rabin Square but was then

called Kings of Israel Square and the bullets missed, or the assassin had a change of heart or was stopped. What if? What if Rabin had lived could he have sealed the peace with the Palistinians? Maybe, and if so, do we have a second intifada? If no second intifada, what becomes of the rallying cry of Islamic terrorists? If Israel and the Palestinians are at peace, how does that affect the Middle East? Does it allow for greater coordination of security and intelligence, are the 9/11 terrorists exposed by a joint Mossad, Palestinian Authority Task Force. Do we have a second Gulf War? Would certain people still be alive today had Rabin not died that evening? And what of Ariel Sharon, how important is just one single person. We pray for the recovery of this great hero of Israel and we pray for Israel and the faint glimmer of peace should he not recover.

It is impossible to know what would have been, but it is not impossible to dream. And when we dream, when we think about how one person's life or one vote could send ripples of change through the pages of time and space; **we realize in that moment the incredible power we have as human beings to affect change for better or change for worse in our world**. We realize that no person is insignificant and that no decision that we make is unimportant, and that truly important decisions, like how we vote, or take care of ourselves, or even who we marry, the values we impart to our children, or what we do with our professional skills, they can be enough to tip the balance of history for or against all of us.

Scientists call this phenomenon the "Butterfly Effect" and explain the power of one single action or inaction through the example of nature. They tell

us that the world of nature is so small and interdependent that a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon rainforest can generate a violent storm on the other side of the earth. Today, we realize, perhaps more than ever, that the world of human activity also has its own 'Butterfly Effect'—for better or for worse." One action or inaction of a human being can be the difference between life and death, success or failure, war or peace,

The rabbis of the Talmud understood this as well, it is why they declared quite prophetically that whoever destroys a single life it is as though he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire universe. (Sanhedrin 5:4) Because as our tradition has explained for generations, so incredible is God's creative power that though every human being was created *bt'zelem elohim* in the divine image of God, and though we all come from the same father and mother Adam & Eve, we are each unique, and each have a unique purpose in this world.

Though there are billions of us, each one of us is unique and irreplaceable. It is why we grieve so deeply we are faced with the death of a friend or a loved one. It is not that we don't have other friends, or other loved ones, but we don't have <u>that</u> one anymore. It is why we often call death a loss, because we have lost something, something irreplaceable. For those we know and love, our friends and family we don't need the "What If Game". We know deeply the intrinsic value of a human life, the import and impact that it has on our own lives, we need only look to those we love and imagine our private world

without them. For some of us it is not an imagination; it is not a dream, we learned the value of their lives to us the moment we lost them.

Yet what about the world beyond our family and our circle of friends; what about the public and private figures who shape the course of history? So often it's only through the prism of historical hindsight that we learn the important and crucial impact a person or people made on our world. But what if we could see the future, what if we could intuitively know that a particular person or event was so important, so central to the future of our nation or our world that without them everything could unravel? How differently would we act, how differently would we treat them or a decision that involves them? I know it sounds like the stuff of science fiction, the very idea that we could know today the importance of a person or event for our future, but when we really think about it, it's actually not that crazy.

For sure we know that some decisions we make will, at least potentially have a longer and greater impact on our lives than others, and likewise we know that certain people, elected officials, employers, teachers, spouses, good friends will have a profound impact on our future. We may not know the variables, the anonymous people or happenstance events that will also shape our future as a nation, a community and individually, but we do know these people and these decisions, and therefore how we approach them and how we treat them is critical to our individual and collective present and future. What we do today, how we act and what we decide has the greatest influence over what will be of our tomorrow.

And so how should we act today so as to best shape and influence our tomorrow? The answer from our tradition is that we should act, and live and decide as thought the entire world depended on us, as though the saving of a life or the taking of a life could save or destroy the entire world. We should act as though that life were ours. It is not often, if ever that we have the power to take or save another person's life in our hands, but we have that power over our own lives everyday. We know that in the lives of those who love us and who we love we are that important, that their whole world, their universe revolves around us. I say that not in a conceded way, for we are not conceded to think that we are important to those who love us, rather it is just the opposite, a sign of humility to realize that we are not free agents; that others are invested and depend on us.

But as we go from his place this evening, and as we consider the world we live in, the small world of our family and friends and the big world of our community and our nation, we would do well to remember that we may very well be the crucial piece that hold those worlds together, that through the lens of history we could come to realize that at one point, for one moment everything depended on us, and we would do well I think to strive to act accordingly.

Our tradition reminds us of this in one other way. When we say the mourners kaddish, and we come to the very last line, Oseh Shalom b'mromav, the one who makes shalom, peace or wholeness in the high heavens. Our rabbis teach that we should take a step backwards out of our spot in the world, and look to our left and our right, look down and look up, to look all around that empty space and see just what the world would be missing if we were not in it.

As we confront the death and the loss of a loved one, in the wisdom of our tradition, Judaism reminds us of our own importance, how the world would be that much more empty without us, that much more incomplete. And so at the very end of the kaddish we step back into the world, we step back into our place and we bring the circle closer, there are no more missing pieces, we carry the memory of our loved one back into the circle with us and in doing so we create the Shalom that the prayer talks about, not only peace but its more basic meaning--- wholeness. For without everyone of us the world would be missing a piece, the most important piece our piece, and you never know that might just be the piece our world needs at this very moment to make it from today to tomorrow.