

**Groundhog Day**  
Rabbi Hal B. Schevitz  
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DJ 1: Okay, campers, rise and shine, and don't forget your booties 'cause it's coooold out there today.

DJ 2: It's coooold out there every day. What is this, Miami Beach?

DJ 1: Not hardly. And you know, you can expect hazardous travel later today with that, you know, that, uh, that blizzard thing.

DJ 2: [mockingly] That blizzard - thing. That blizzard - thing. Oh, well, here's the report! The National Weather Service is calling for a "big blizzard thing!"

DJ 1: Yessss, they are. But you know, there's another reason why today is especially exciting.

DJ 2: Especially cold!

DJ 1: Especially cold, okay, but the big question on everybody's lips...

DJ 2: On their chapped lips...

DJ 1: On their chapped lips, right: Do ya think Phil is gonna come out and see his shadow?

DJ 2: Punxsutawney Phil!

DJ 1: That's right, woodchuck-chuckers – it's...

DJ 1/ DJ 2 in unison: GROUNDHOG DAY!

So declare the voices on the clock radio in the room of Phil Connors, at 6:00 o'clock in the morning on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, as the song "I've Got You Babe" by Sonny and Cher fades away, in the now-classic film *Groundhog Day*. And I thank the Cantor for helping me recreate that scene from one of my favorite movies. *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray, was written and directed by Harold Ramis, most famous for playing Egon Spengler in the *Ghostbusters* films. Ramis also directed *Caddyshack*, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, and *Analyze This*, and was a co-writer for *National Lampoon's Animal House*. It is also worth noting that Ramis, and Danny Rubin, his co-writer on *Groundhog Day*, are both Jewish. Even though Ramis and Murray collaborated many

times in making comedies, *Groundhog Day*, while containing its fair share of laughs, is actually a very serious movie.

Before we dive into the film and its significance on this holiest of days, I must issue a caveat, lest you think that my use of *Groundhog Day* for a sermon is entirely original. I am not the first member of the clergy that has viewed this film through a religious lens. It has received praise from Buddhists, Christians, and Jews, for reflecting the values of their respective communities. Buddhists have said that the movie illustrates the continuing cycle of rebirth, and the suffering that humans must try to escape. Christians have said that Murray's character represents the ideal Christian journey, that Phil has a deadness about him, and is reborn in a new persona, resurrected from his previous way of living. One Jewish way of looking at the movie is to see that Phil is rewarded, not by achieving a place in heaven, but rather by being returned to earth in order to do more mitzvot. Ramis himself tells the story of how he saw Chabadniks holding signs outside of movie theaters that read, "Are you living the same day over and over again?"

*Groundhog Day* is a powerful film that directly speaks to the themes of Yom Kippur. It is a lesson about Teshuvah, how we become better people, and a reflection on the meaning of time. So, without further ado, let us recall this masterpiece of moviemaking. Spoiler alert for a thirty-year-old motion picture.

Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, is a cynical and selfish television weatherman from Pittsburgh who is forced to travel to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania on February 2 to do a puff piece on the emergence of the groundhog. He is a pampered prima donna who feels that this assignment is beneath him, and looks down on the natives of the town as simpletons, constantly degrading their way of life. We can see this in his sarcastic comment when he delivers his first broadcast. He says into the camera, "this is the one time where television really fails capture the true excitement of a large squirrel predicting the weather." For the rest of the day, he treats everyone rudely, and wants to leave town as soon as possible. However, a major snowstorm prevents him from doing so. Phil takes this turn of events as a personal affront. Since he predicted that the storm would not happen, it should not have happened. After exhausting every effort to leave town, Phil returns to his bed-and-breakfast and goes to sleep.

He wakes up to what should be the next day, but finds that his experiences are eerily the same: Sonny and Cher's, "I've Got You Babe," the dialog from voices on the radio, his interactions with the people he meets, and the events that happen around him are all identical to the previous day. As we would expect, his first reaction is confusion. At the end of this day, he attempts to analytically outsmart fate. He tries stays up all night, and breaks a pencil in half and leaves it on the nightstand next to the alarm clock.

Phil wakes up at 6:00am with the pencil intact. He is terrified. When he tells his producer Rita, played by Andie MacDowell, she doesn't believe him and tells him to "get his head examined." He sees a medical doctor and a psychiatrist, but they are unable to offer him help. As we will discover, his problem is not medical, but rather, moral.

At the end of this third day, Phil finds himself in a bowling alley, talking to two townies. He asks them "what would you do if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?...What if there were no tomorrow?" One of the yokels, in a drunken stupor, responds, "No tomorrow...there would be no consequences. There would be no hangovers. We could do whatever we wanted!" Phil, coming to this realization, says in subdued jubilation, "That's true. We could do whatever we want." Phil and his new buddies go on a joyride throughout town, during which he exclaims, "I'm not going to live by their rules anymore." At the end of that day, Phil winds up in jail, only to wake up the next morning as if nothing happened.

Although played to comedic effect, this is a powerful moment in the movie, prompted by some of the most important questions a person can ask about oneself: does my life even matter? Is life meaningful? Is there any purpose to what I do? At this point in the film, Phil's actions tell us that his answer to these questions is a resounding "no." If there is no tomorrow, if there is no purpose, if there are no consequences, why not indulge in the most hedonistic of pleasures?

And that's what Phil does. The next few scenes in the movie show Phil learning from his previous experiences, using that knowledge to his own advantage. As he passes a homeless, elderly man begging for money, he says, "catch you tomorrow." He punches out an annoying old high school classmate. He collects personal information about a woman in order to lure her

into satisfying his own pleasures. He memorizes the schedule of an armored truck and the behavior of the two bumbling security guards in order to steal a large sum of money.

One morning, we see Phil in the town diner, seated at a table filled with pancakes, fatty fried meats, and pastries. As he lights up a cigarette, Rita looks at him with scorn, and asks if he worries about cholesterol, lung cancer, or love handles. Phil responds that he doesn't have to worry about anything anymore.

Reflecting on Phil's narcissism, Rita recites to him the poem "The Wretch," by Sir Walter Scott:

"The wretch, concentrated all in self  
Living, shall forfeit fair renown  
And, doubly dying, shall go down  
To the vile dust, from whence he sprung  
Unwept, unhonored, and unsung."

If the writers of the movie wanted to turn to Jewish literature to reflect on Phil, they might have opened to the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. It speaks of a man who tries to find wisdom and life's meaning by spoiling himself with all of life's pleasures and riches, but finds that it is all meaningless, and that he has been leading the life of the fool. All pleasures are ultimately *hevel*, ephemeral, fleeting moments that are no more than chasing after wind; that our end, like all living creatures, is just dust. We will also see this foreboding theme in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer later in our service. Eventually, Phil will come to the realization that he is the wretch, impacting no one, and if he died, no one would care.

But before this haunting discovery, Phil turns his focus to Rita. He begins to engage her in the same way that he has dealt with everyone since he discovered that he is stuck in Punxsutawney. He treats her like an object, and cannot help but continually reveal his shallow motives, demonstrating to us that he really is the wretch. Each day, so carefully planned by Phil to woo Rita, ends in rejection.

After so many denials, Phil becomes despondent. The movie makes us ask ourselves: Is Phil's depressive state due to Rita's refusals, or the deeper crisis that all of the material and personal gratification in the world is not spiritually fulfilling? As we are left to ponder this

question, we watch Phil's deterioration. His once peppy reporting on the groundhog becomes a derisive rant, as he says, on camera, "You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil. I'll give you a winter prediction: It's gonna be cold, it's gonna be grey, and it's gonna last you for the rest of your life." Phil then attempts to end his life in a variety of ways, sounding remarkably like the "who by this and who by that" catalog of punishments in Unetaneh Tokef. On one occasion, he even kidnaps the groundhog and drives off of a cliff with it. Still, each day, Phil wakes up in his bed at 6:00 in the morning on February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

After these dark moments, the movie's tone abruptly shifts. In the diner, Phil opens up to Rita and tells her, "I wake up every day, right here, right in Punxsutawney, and it's always February 2<sup>nd</sup>, and there's nothing I can do about it."

This is the turning point in the movie, and it is clearly ironic. Only when Phil recognizes his powerlessness, does he truly begin to take action, exercise agency, and begin to change. He understands that he needs companionship and begins to honestly communicate with Rita. At the end of a day in which Phil is completely open with Rita, when she is falling asleep by his side, he whispers something to her, almost a prayer, showing for the first time, self-awareness and humility.

Most turning points in movies show us a shift in the plot that will lead to a conclusion or an evolution or growth in the character. While this is certainly the case of Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*, it is even more true in the Jewish sense, because this is when Phil starts to do Teshuvah.

The next day is still February 2<sup>nd</sup>, but something has changed. Phil's mindset has shifted. He brings his colleagues coffee and donuts. He greets a hotel neighbor with an uplifting quote from poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Winter slumbering in the open air, wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!" He reads poetry, learns to play the piano and how to sculpt ice. He rescues a child falling out of a tree, fixes a tire on the car of elderly ladies, and performs the Heimlich maneuver on a man choking on meat. He becomes the most popular person in Punxsutawney, even drawing the highest bids for the town bachelor auction.

We also see Phil revisiting the homeless, elderly man that he passed all of those times before. This time, Phil gives him all the money he has, and, day in and day out, provides him

with food and shelter. Tragically, this elderly man dies each day. This deeply affects Phil, and we observe a poignant contrast: when Phil was only interested in himself, life was cheap and meaningless. After he begins caring about others, he finds that life is precious and worth going to great lengths to save, even if he continually fails.

Phil's next morning television report reflects on life and death, as he speaks of the inability to stop death, while also praising the existence of life. He says, "When Chekhov saw the long winter...he saw a winter bleak and dark and bereft of hope. Yet we know that winter is just another step in the cycle of life. But standing here among the people of Punxsutawney...and basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts...I couldn't imagine a better fate...than a long and lustrous winter."

Phil also wins the heart of Rita, not because he was trying to woo her, but because he made himself into a person who was worthy of her affections. Amazed by the impact he has had on the people of Punxsutawney, Rita asks Phil, "what did you do today?" He responds, "Oh, you know. Same old, same old." He brushes off her question, but we get the joke. He has been repeating the same day, but it is not the same Phil. He has transformed. His Teshuvah is complete and his time loop finally comes to an end.

The next morning, at 6:00, the clock radio plays "I've Got You Babe," as it has every single day since Phil's Groundhog Day journey began. When Phil awakes and hears the song, the look on his face shows resignation, that he is still stuck on February 2nd. But careful listeners will notice that it is playing a different part of the song. Then, we see Rita reaching over to shut off the alarm. Phil joyously says, "Today is tomorrow."

Throughout the movie, "tomorrow" is that moment that Phil constantly longs for, but is unable to reach. When Phil first experiences Groundhog Day for a second time, he asks, "What if there is no tomorrow? There wasn't one today." The movie never explains the time loop, but that's not the point. The time loop is there to give Phil the opportunity to change. Phil knows that no one will remember his actions the next morning. But he will not forget, and therefore he will continue to work on himself. Only when Phil allows himself to change and embrace the preciousness of time, is he able to experience the passage of time, to experience tomorrow.

This is the beauty of tomorrow. Tomorrow gives life meaning. Tomorrow gives us possibilities and opportunities. We are able to change so that the person we are tomorrow is better than who we are today, so that the world in which we live can be made better than it is today.

This is also the anxiety of tomorrow. Everything ends. We are mortal beings with a limited time in this world. The Book of Proverbs (20:27) teaches נֶר יִישׁוּבֵת אֶדָם, “The soul of a person is the lamp of the Eternal One.” The lighting of candles is an ever-present custom in Jewish tradition, from memorial candles to the opening ritual of every Shabbat and festival. But like lit candles that eventually burn out, life is fragile and brief.

Likewise, the Unetaneh Tokef prayer tells us, “Each person’s origin is dust, and each person will return to the earth having spent life seeking sustenance. Scripture compares human beings to a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattered dust, and a vanishing dream.” Even in the midst of this sobering truth, our actions and our memories are still linked with the eternity of God.

This moment in our service declares that Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah have the power to change the course of our lives. Despite our limited time, we have the freedom to change and affect the world around us. Phil Connors comes to learn this and live this. At the beginning of his story, Phil is a wretch. At the conclusion of the story, he has become a mensch. Phil shows us that what makes life worth living is not what you get from it, but what you put into it. Journalist Rick Brookhiser, in his review of the movie, says that “[Phil’s] reward is that the day is taken from him. Loving life includes loving the fact that it goes.”

Because our time is limited, it is precious. As the movie shows us, today cannot be special if there is always tomorrow. We must ask ourselves if we live like we understand that time marches forward. Even though we aren’t actually caught in the *Groundhog Day* time loop, we often act as if we are. We are dominated by the busy-ness of our lives, moving from one thing to another without intentionally taking steps to change and improve ourselves and the world around us. It is too often that time controls us, rather than us making the most of the time we have. If Phil Connors can improve his life when he has all of the time in the world, how

much more so should we work to improve our lives when we know our time is limited, when the length of our days is unknown?

Yom Kippur reminds us of the opportunities of time, as well as the finitude of time. It is a day where time seems to stand still, and yet it will end with sundown later today. It is a day that speaks of the possibilities of life, even as it reminds us of our mortality. It is a day that invites us to change and to cherish the moments that we have, because what comes next is a mystery.

In 2017, *Groundhog Day* became a Broadway musical, written and directed by the movie's co-writer Danny Rubin. Of course, Bill Murray went to see the show. And do you know what he did the next day? He went to see the show again. The New York Times reported that Murray was visibly sobbing throughout the show, and quoted Murray saying, "The idea that we just have to try again. We just have to try again. It's such a beautiful, powerful idea."

We live in time, even as time leaves us. As it beckons us towards a new day, Yom Kippur calls us to grow and change, to become the best we can be. Let us reflect on the time allotted to us on this earth, so that we cherish and make the most of today, tomorrow, and every tomorrow that follows. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah*. May we be inscribed and sealed for good in the year ahead.