

**YOM KIPPUR**  
**5776**

Sadie was dying and her husband Bernie was sitting by her bed. “Bernie,” Sadie says, “tell me what you are thinking about the limousines for my funeral.” “Well, I am going to have two: one for me and our kids and one for your sisters and their husbands.” “That’s what I thought,” Sadie says, “but you are only going to have one and my sisters will ride with you.” “Sadie,” Bernie says, “you know I can’t stand your sisters and they can’t stand me; we have never liked each other from the moment we met.” “Promise me, Bernie that you will have only one limo and all of you will be together in it,” Sadie says. “But Sadie,” Bernie pleads. “Bernie,” Sadie insists, “promise me.” “Well alright, Sadie,” Bernie says, “I promise but you have to know that this is going to ruin my day.”

In the movie “Still Mine,” there is a scene when Craig and Irene, an elderly couple, are driving in their pickup truck and Irene asks Craig if he thinks very much about dying and he says: “No, but I most likely should.” Irene then says: “When I was ten and saw old people I would think about dying and it confused me but I figured that when I got older I would have it figured out but I haven’t.” How many of us at a funeral have thought about our own funeral; not what will be said about us but simply of the fact that one day we will die? It’s like having our own mortality sitting right next to us; perhaps holding our hand.

Theresa Brown, an oncology nurse, writes about how difficult it is even in hospitals to face the fear and anger that accompany impending death. She observes how hard it is to talk about death and shares her confusion over this given we all know throughout our lives that we are going to die. Therefore, she asks, why is it so difficult to discuss? Rabbi David Wolpe reminds us that every stratagem of poetry and ritual during Yom Kippur—not only but especially, *Netaneh Tokef*—is employed to teach us something we already know—that we will die. But although we know it, we do not feel it, we hide from it.” Walter in “Ed King” by David Guttererson says: “We do not find any consolation in the fact that death is every human being’s problem and not just ours.”

Rabbi Daniel Zucker in writing about the euphemisms for death says: “Our loved ones did not pass away, they did not depart, they died and that accepting this is the first stage of comfort from death.” Rabbi Karen Soria shares: “When she was in mourning for her father and heard ‘I am sorry for your loss’ her inside voice was saying ‘I did not lose him, he died.’” Rabbi Soria tells us that “an object is lost, a child may lose a parent in a crowd, someone may be lost en route but the loss caused by death is unrelated to being lost or losing something because there is no possibility of return.” How often, even with how much longer people are living today, do we say: “Life is too short?” If life is too short what are we doing with our lives that is so valuable that we deserve to live longer?

There is a Yiddish saying that tells us that a fortunate person is one who has a happy old age. No one can have a happy old age who is filled with fear of dying. But, being afraid of dying is part of being human. The Baal Shem Tov taught that fear of the unknown future and

especially of death bars light from entering our lives. David Sarnoff tells us: "We cannot demean life by living in fear of death." This is much easier said than done for most.

The only thing our Torah tells us about death is comforting: we are gathered to our ancestors. What a wonderful image: to be embraced by our ancestors. The author Bob Morris in writing about his father's death relates: "The rabbi came and asked our father to imagine all the little and big good things he did and with each one to see a glow that he left behind that lights a dark road stretching back in time." Morris' father said: "Thank you, that was beautiful, rabbi." Bob Morris realized then that we all are able to create many glows and a long lighted road. Theresa Brown reminds us that not all but some of us go gentle into the night. This observation and certainly *Netaneh Tokef* reminds us that not a single one of us is in control no matter how much we may want to be. Nevertheless, we must keep on living and doing good things with our lives if we are to create these points of light to illumine the road for ourselves and those after us.

*Netaneh Tokef* is a prayer and a confrontation. It tells us that we do not know what will be a moment from now yet alone a year from now. *Netaneh Tokef* is a humbling composition that many of us albeit motionlessly run from. Rabbi Shai Held reminds us: "We cannot always be thinking of the reality that we may not live through the night. We can't live like that all the time but everyone has to live like that some of the time if we are to live purposeful lives." Thinking about our own mortality is required if we are to be mature, sophisticated and thoughtful human beings. It is not to scare us, threaten us or paralyze us. It is sad that so much religious teaching is built on fear and threats of punishment. An all compassionate G-d does not create a hell to punish anyone eternally. I find this notion obscene as I do those signs along the highway that say: "Hell is real." Believing in such a hell is already being in hell.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches: "Judaism is not directed to fear of death: it is directed to a far more dangerous fear—the fear of life with all its pain, disappointment and unpredictability." Rabbi Sacks reminds us that Judaism is directed completely to fighting for justice and compassion and these have to be fought for in this life, in this world and not in some next world and next life. Judaism is concerned with the questions of what are we doing with our lives and of what worth are our lives? When we truly experience Yom Kippur our old selves die and we are reborn through our *teshuvah* and our hope that we will do better in the future.

This is why Abigail Pogrebin wrote that Yom Kippur is all about death: "Not morbid thoughts but a laser focus on life and its fragility, its evanescence." Yom Kippur has us think about our death so that we can more deeply appreciate our lives. Yom Kippur and *Netaneh Tokef* force us to think about the fact that we are alive at this moment and to ask ourselves: what have we done with our lives, what are we doing with our lives and what will we do with the time we have left? This is why Yom Kippur is Yom Kippur and why it is concerning and sad when we do not let Yom Kippur be Yom Kippur.

Traditionally on Yom Kippur we dress in white to remind us of the shrouds we will be buried in. We fast like corpses who need no food. We light yartzheit candles, we have *Yizkor* and we abstain from sexual relations. This is what Rabbi Wolpe meant when he said that Yom Kippur is to teach us about dying so that we can live more meaningful mitzvah filled lives. Dr. Atul Gawande in writing about when her daughter's piano teacher was diagnosed with terminal cancer tells us that the teacher decided to devote whatever time she had remaining to teaching her young students. She did this and was able to be at their final recital at which time she gave each student a special gift and a personal blessing. What would we do with our remaining time in such a situation?

The late Rabbi Alan Lew would tell his students and congregants that the image of the Book of Life and the Book of Death that are opened on Yom Kippur is intended to convey to us how high the stakes are. Abigail Pogrebin, one of Rabbi Lew's students, commented that this teaching always brought her mind to abrupt attention and stopped her mind from wandering. Yom Kippur gives us the opportunity to see that we either live lives that make the world a better place or not. This is what determines whether we are inscribed in the Book of Life or the Book of Death realizing "if we aren't busy living, we're busy dying." There are no higher stakes.

*Netaneh Tokef* is to beat down our resistance so we will openly accept that we are mortal. This is why many of us resist it and even talk all the way through it. This prayer challenges us to come out of hiding and experience the eternity of our souls and to sense our non-physical and non-material lives. On Yom Kippur our souls, our emotions, our intellects, our non-physical beings are to be on overdrive while our physical beings are to be dormant. Thinking and worrying about money, sex, sports and things are to be absent while concerns about forgiveness, improving our behavior, becoming more giving and compassionate people are to preoccupy us. A rabbi asked his congregation how can any of us have a meaningful Yom Kippur when we can't even turn off our cell phones?

Rabbinic Judaism teaches us that our souls are eternal and the essence of who we are is not limited to physical existence; we exist beyond time because our souls come from G-d and therefore, are forever. Our fear of death is at the center of our inner disharmony. Long before Freud our rabbis understood this. Our rabbis had confidence that if we understood the meaning of death it could contribute to enhancing our lives. Our teachers have shared that just as we do not have problems when we see the seasons change, flowers die and the leaves fall, we should understand when a loved one dies that like the spring returns our loved ones can return to us in many different ways.

Dr. Jeffrey Piehler told his family that he was going to build his own coffin. He said that he wanted to do this because it would help him accept his own mortality and thereby enhance his life. He did so with dedication and focus. He had embossed on the underside of the coffin's lid, in front of what will be his sightless eyes, his favorite line of poetry from Sarah Williams, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet: "Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in

perfect light. I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.” Piehler said: “To think about death in the right ways can lead to a better life and make us better people.”

Paulo Coelho asks: “Why do we want to live forever?” He says it is because we want to love someone and be loved by someone forever. To love abundantly is to live abundantly and not to love is not to live; to not have love inside of us is death, to have love inside of us is life. The author Ann Patchett wrote that when her father died all she felt was the joy and love he left in the place his death created. She was able to see that death is the completion of our purpose here; that we have finished our jobs and we are now free to send our atoms back into the earth and stars. Right before dying her dad told her and her siblings how much he loved them. What could any of us do or say before dying more precious and holy than this? What are we hiding away in our hearts that we need to share? What do we need to say to our loved ones, what do they need to hear from us?

I shared with my children how I worry about how they will feel when I die knowing the sadness and pain I experienced when my parents died; a sadness and pain I never imagined was possible until I was enveloped by it. For weeks after shiva, when walking home from shul in the dark after minyan it was hard for me to put one foot in front of the other and then when home doubling over in grief on our kitchen counter. I explained to them that such sadness and pain can only come from an equally strong and deep love and such love is forever.

Our daughter Tehila wrote in one of her pieces: “I want peace before I rest.” Should we not strive for peace when we are still alive? After we die, the opportunities to make peace with others and ourselves will have gone. Dr. Oliver Sacks, who recently died, wrote as he faced his own impending death: “And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on supernatural or spiritual thoughts, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life—achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.”

Yom Kippur is the Sabbath of Sabbaths. May we all live not being afraid of dying or be afraid as little as is possible. May we learn how to accept our mortality and understand how this can help us live meaningful lives. May we all know that there is so much to live for, so much to be thankful for, so many acts of kindness and compassion to do and so much love to give that we never think, not for a moment, that there is darkness on the other side; there is only light. When we know this we can ride in anyone’s limousine and everyone will be welcome in ours as we drive down the road aglow with all the lights we created with our lives.