

Choosing Life

This is a unique moment in our High Holiday journey. This is the moment we turn our attention towards loved ones who have died—some quite recently, some a number of years ago, but all are very much top of mind.

Interestingly, the liturgy of these holidays also will not let us avoid the sometimes terrifying fact of our own mortality; we simply do not know who will live and who will die. Ernest Becker in his classic book, *The Denial of Death*, has written, “Of all things that move men, one of the principal ones is the terror of death. It is the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune.”

Most moderns fully empathize and often subscribe to these feelings. You might be surprised to know that this existential feeling represents a dramatic departure from the world view sketched by those who shaped Jewish tradition during the rabbinic period close to two thousand years ago.

For our ancestors death was a constant presence. As evidenced from tombstones in the Roman world, life expectancy of peoples for that period was just over twenty-eight years. Moreover, when people died they did so at home and stayed at home until the funeral and burial. Transport to the grave was a public affair; the whole community was involved. Flutes accompanied the body as women were employed as professional wailers. The ritual rarely stayed private, because the loss in fact was felt by everyone.

There’s evidence to suggest that death did not cause the same level of shock and anguish as it does for many today. Most believed that souls lived on after death, that they travelled back and forth between this world and the next. The dead continued to have feelings and needs. The rabbis instruct us that we’re not to eat in the presence of the deceased in our homes. They may be hungry and we certainly could no longer fulfill that need.

In sum, to the ancient rabbis, life and death were not radical opposites. Death is a conscious, sentient state. Life and death are points on a continuum. Death therefore was not oblivion, death

was not the end, but the beginning of a different kind of living, freed from the body which sometimes had been the source of incredible agony in this phase of existence.

A powerful perspective. In Hasidic tradition Rav Nachman came to his friend Rava in a dream after Nachman died. Was death painful? Rava wanted to know. Nachman replied, “It is as painless as lifting a hair from a cup of milk.”

Rabbi Irwin Kula tells the story of his teacher, Rabbi Hyman who was truly larger-than-life. Midway into our Talmud class Rabbi Hyman was diagnosed with brain cancer and he quickly declined. One day a group of us went to visit him in his home. His kids were playing outside, yelling and laughing as they threw the ball around. They were so young and couldn’t have known or understood how sick their father was.

When I first saw him, I couldn’t believe the sight. His head was swollen almost beyond recognition and he lay very still in his bed. Some of us began to cry and then we all did. One of us piped up, “You have to fight this. How can it be you’ll never teach again?” Rabbi Hyman looked up at us and that twinkle was still very much present. “What do you mean? Now I’ll be able to see it all, to study with God, to finally understand all that I’ve ever tried to teach.”

That’s not good enough, we cried. How can we keep going without you? And he turned to us with a raised eyebrow and said, “Leave you? Where would I go?”

Death as continuum of life.

I walked in to the hospital room to visit a man I have known for many years. His daughter and granddaughter were holding his hand. “I’m not sure dad can hear us anymore. He was so brave. He focused all his attention on us. Typical of dad. In the last day he kept calling out ‘Lynn’. That’s my mother’s name. I think she is beckoning him. That has given me a lot of comfort.”

They continue to communicate with us, isn’t it true?

Remember the plaintive pleas of Emily in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* as she wants to take one more look at the world she is leaving.

Take me up the hill to my grave. But first: wait! One more look.

Goodbye, world. Goodbye, mama and papa. Goodbye to clocks ticking and mama's sunflowers...and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anyone to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?

That's what it is to be alive, Emily continues, to move about in a cloud of ignorance; go up and down trampling on the feelings of others...to spend and waste time as though we've got a million years. To always be at the mercy of one self-centered passion or another. That's the ignorance and blindness of living.

Death is the wise teacher of how we must live to ensure smooth gateway to the world beyond.

Perhaps the most famous part of the Mishnah, the collection called *Pirke Avot* begins with this unambivalent statement: All Israel has a portion in the world to come. With this headline it's a little surprising there's no single book or tractate that systematically lays out Judaism's approach to the after-life. You have to go searching for it, piece it together. Maybe this is because we are heirs to a rationalist Talmudic tradition. Our understanding of worlds beyond ours is not fact-based. After all no one has ever returned with pictures.

Yet, many people tell dazzling stories of communication with loved ones from the next world. To quickly summarize the prevailing views within our vast tradition, there is a corporeal and non-corporeal part of a person called the *neshamah* which enters the body before birth and departs before death. It hovers at least for a while and perhaps signals us from the beyond. The *neshamah* is subject to judgement, with the righteous entering the closest thing to heaven, which the rabbis called Gan Eden. Souls may become free agents, so it is plausible that they enter into another body or, during the Messianic Era, join with our own bodies in a resurrection.

What do I personally believe? For many years I have believed in worlds and realms beyond our own. To me it is simply not plausible to believe that all reality resides in what we can ascertain at this time and place. To buttress this, many of you have told me over the years miraculous stories of sightings and signals that are impossible to ignore.

For Gina and me our views were sealed the night of her beloved father's funeral. He had died quite suddenly in an airport while making herculean efforts to take care of his beloved wife in warmer climates. Shirley had suffered from advanced Alzheimer's. The night of his funeral we were sitting

on his bed after one of the most difficult and emotional services I've ever officiated at. And we noticed a little string flying around the room. We watched it for a while and suddenly it stopped right over his pillow and twirled and continued to twirl. That was an unmistakable signal to us: "I am here." We believe he was telling us, "Do not worry, I am at peace." Buster was signaling us, we believe, that he will continue to watch over his loved ones.

These signs can feel unmistakable. Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, who has brought great research and wisdom to the dying process, became almost obsessed with life after death after a visit from Mrs. Schwartz. Kübler-Ross was about ready to retire from teaching her famed Death and Dying seminar. She was gathering her things in her office when the elevator door opened. A woman suddenly appeared. "My jaw dropped open," Dr. Kübler-Ross exclaimed.

The woman smiled at me as if we knew each other. This woman, this apparition, came straight towards me. "Dr. Ross, I had to come back. Do you mind if we walk to your office?" Ten months earlier Mrs. Schwartz had died and been buried. Nevertheless she was there in my office standing beside me. I sat down before I fainted.

"Dr. Ross, I came back for two reasons. Number one, to thank you for all you've done for me." I touched my pen, papers, and coffee cups to make sure they were real. "The second reason I came back is to tell you not to give up your work on death and dying...not yet." A moment later Mrs. Schwartz vanished. I searched all over for her, found nothing, but I am sure to this day that she was there. All of a sudden the last thing in the world I wanted to do was quit work.

Some of you may be thinking that this seems very new to me, why did I learn years ago and believe to this day that Judaism is a this worldly religion, that Christianity dealt with souls leaving the body after life, even resurrection, not Judaism?

In fact, after-life speculation permeates our tradition. But how Judaism is taught and portrayed has gone through many phases. Some of us grew up in the post-Holocaust era where rabbis avoided theology and the spiritual inclination of Judaism altogether. Yet, mysticism, kabbalah, and after-life speculation were always readily available in our vast textual heritage, and like the many species of fruit available at the market, these texts were available to access or leave behind. The second reason

it all seems new comes directly again from *Pirke Avot*. Rabbi Jacob said “This world is like an ante-chamber to the world to come. Prepare thyself in the ante-chamber that thou mightst enter right into the hall.”

In other words we can prepare for the next world and the judgement that awaits us at heaven’s door by how we live our lives. The emphasis on this world is terribly important no matter what we believe about worlds beyond. What we do here can determine our tomorrow. The good things in life last for limited days, but a good name endures forever. The name might or might not secure a place in worlds beyond, but it will certainly secure a place in the hearts and minds of those we care about the most.

So how do we secure our places in both of these worlds? Let me close with a couple of stories that might show the way.

Bonnie Fetterman writes:

One morning I woke up early and felt my father dying. A gust of wind shot by me and I knew my father’s soul was escaping his tortured body. One night I had a dream unlike any I’ve had before. It was a visit from my father. I could feel his big bearlike hug and hear the sound of his voice. He told me not to worry that everything would be okay. After that it actually was. Eleven months after he died I had another dream visit from my father. This time I could only hear, not see him. He told me I would no longer see him because the soul was leaving his body but not to doubt he was always there.

Over the years I feel more and more that he never left me. When I do something particularly mature, I feel his approval shining on me. When I miss the mark, I feel his reassurance that I will make it. This strong attachment I feel strikes me as strange. We were not particularly close during his life. We were so different in temperament: he, patient, stoical some would call it; I, restless and quick-tempered.

My father’s life was sad in many ways. So many gifts and talents unused, so many ambitions disappointed. He was a plumber, a job he hated. He dreamed of being a writer, a poet, an actor, all dreams thwarted by family exigencies.

My father spent every day doing mitzvot, not necessarily mitzvot in the religious sense, but good deeds and acts of kindness he felt commanded to do. I remember rising early Sunday morning to buy fresh rolls and deliver them to various people he knew or shut-ins who were alone, people he thought could use a visit and treats from a good kosher bakery. We called these excursions “Dad’s bread route”. Dad understood loneliness and he also knew how to overcome it.

In the course of my days I try not to let an opportunity to do good get by me and then, like him, take it one step further, keeping alive his memory. I wonder if he’d ever guess it would be me—the youngest and most rebellious of his offspring. Knowing him I guess he would have been amused and maybe a little happy. I have no doubt I will find out one day.

Rabbi Nosson Finkel once hosted a group of American businessmen in Israel. And he posed this profound question: “Who can tell me what the lesson of the Holocaust is?” No one knew how to respond. Rabbi Finkel continued,

People were transported in the worst possible manner: by rail car. They thought they were going to a work camp. But they were actually going to a death camp. After hours in this inhumane corral with no light, no bathroom, freezing cold, they arrived at the camp.

Men were separated from women, mothers from daughters, fathers from sons. The lucky ones were given bunks to sleep. As they went into that area only one person was given a blanket for every six. The person who received the blanket had to decide: am I going to push the blanket to the five other people who did not get one of them, or am I going to pull it towards myself and actually stay warm? During that defining moment we learned the essence of humanity because someone pushed the blanket to five others.

With that he stood up. “Take your blanket, take it back to America and push it to five other people.”

That is something we can do. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin talks of his father, Shlomo, who worked full-time as an accountant. Suddenly Shlomo was afflicted with a stroke. While still in the hospital his son Joseph received a call from one of the religious leader's top aides who had an accounting question he wanted Joseph to ask his father. It had been only a few days since his father regained consciousness. He was weak and confused. Joseph hesitated to ask his father the question but the assistant persisted, and kept repeating, ask Shlomo. Ask Shlomo.

Joseph went to his father's room and asked the question and Shlomo offered an immediate response. At that moment Joseph realized the leader's brilliance and compassion. He knew how sick Shlomo was, but he also understood how important it was for him lying in the hospital bed confused and half-paralyzed to still feel needed. No matter what our physical state, we need to feel needed.

As Joseph Campbell put it in the PBS series called *The Power of Myth*:

When looking back at your life, you'll see the moments which seem to be great failures. Even though it felt like a real negative event at the time, it was not. The crisis may require you to exhibit strength that you did not know you had. The dark night of the soul comes just before revelation of who you are and what you are capable of doing.

Yes, life teaches perspective. That is what the Torah teaches when we read that Moses will die *b'etzem hayom hazeh*, in the middle of the day. Middle of the day so all can see and know his mortality? Was it because God wanted the people to protest the taking of their leader?

I highly doubt the latter, for that decision already had been made. I think God wanted the people to realize that because Moses was going to die, they too would die. That there is an urgency to the time we have on earth. God wanted them to see that the moment when the soul leaves the body is a peaceful moment, a moment where in fact you are now free of the ravages, the toll that affliction can take on our mortal bodies.

God is teaching us that if we live up to our potential of caring and giving, we will leave behind a legacy that all of our loved ones will benefit from, a legacy that will ensure a peaceful transition of our soul to the people and the worlds that await us, realms beyond our own.

Knowing that death is part of a continuum of life, we can put our mortality in context and lessen our fears. Our biggest worry should not be that we might die. We will. What should concern us is if we have not lived, truly lived in the way God, our loved ones, and we ourselves know we should.

With the precious time we have remaining, may we in the best sense of the word choose life.