

Yom Kippur 5773: *Let Death Be Our Teacher*

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Introduction

Shanah Tovah.

By now, many of you have seen me deliver sermons on Shabbat and on the High Holy Days...and, what some of you may be thinking is...“she’s a natural.” 😊

Thank you. But it’s Yom Kippur and I gotta come clean: In full disclosure, I never aspired to be a congregational Rabbi.

Now, most people, when interviewing for entrance into rabbinical school, eagerly discuss their hopes and dreams for working in a congregation. Not me. When asked about the type of rabbinate I would choose (yes, rabbinate is a word), I told the interviewing committee: “I hope to work in a hospital, nursing home, or hospice.”

That interview was in January of 2001. 6 months earlier, my father (z’l), who lived courageously for 2.5 years with a terminal diagnosis, had died. In January of 2001, I was finishing my Masters degree at Harvard Divinity School, enrolled in classes called “Meanings Made of Death”, “Interpretations of Suffering in the Christian Tradition” and “Care for the Dying.” I volunteered every Shabbat at the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged, accompanying the rabbis as they led services and visited residents. The summer my father died I was a hospital chaplain at Brigham and Women’s in Boston.

Needless to say, I was a hit at cocktail parties.

At the time, it did seem like an odd path -- that in order to figure out my LIFE, which had taken such an unexpected turn, I instinctively went to study DEATH. And, while others looked askance or excused themselves for another drink as I described my rounds in the ICU or my visits to the dementia wing, I loved my time in the hospital and in the nursing home.

I sat with the best scholars and experts on the subject of life and death, and I learned. As I struggled to navigate my life, **I let death be my teacher.**

Today, on Yom Kippur, we’re going to try and let death be our teacher, too.

¹ Special thanks to Dahvi Waller and Leslie Sholl Jaffe for reviewing and editing this sermon.

Part 1: Yom Kippur as a Rehearsal

Yom Kippur is traditionally understood as a **rehearsal of our death**. For some of you, this is a new teaching, so let me repeat: Yom Kippur is traditionally understood as a rehearsal of our death.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein anticipates our shock or confusion upon hearing such a claim and responds:

"[Look...] Yom Kippur is an unusual holiday. We are such a passionately life-affirming culture. We cherish and sanctify life. Any ritual law of the tradition may be suspended to save or protect a human life. We say "L'Chaim -- To Life!" over every glass of wine.

But on Yom Kippur, we confront death. We rehearse death.

We deny the body -- fasting (which for some Jews is a form of death), abstaining from sexual intimacy, removing our jewelry and finery, our fashionable clothes, our polished, comfortable shoes, to don the simplest of garb. Tradition dictates the wearing of a kittel -- a death shroud.

In Medieval monasteries, monks slept each night in their coffins, to remind them that the wage of sin is death.

That's morbid.

*But to don a shroud once a year, to seriously confront death, is cleansing. Because in the face of death all the rationalizations, all the excuses, all the defenses fall away, and I am forced to see who and what I really am."*²

(I know...What?! Death? That's not why I showed up today...)

Stay with me.

Here's what I'm asking us to do: One time a year, on Yom Kippur – a day that invites us to consider our final days – *can we allow ourselves for 10 minutes to imagine what they will be like?* NOT because our tradition values morbidity. The opposite! Because our tradition demands that we choose life. **The Yom Kippur practice calls out to each of us: confront death in order to live your life.**

Whether you are 18 or 80 –
Whether your Jewish observance is intermittent
or interwoven into the fabric of your daily life –
Yom Kippur asks each and every one of us
to rehearse our death so that we can truly live our life.

² Rabbi Ed Feinstein: <http://www.vbs.org/page.cfm?p=665>

That's what I'm telling you this year. There's no bait and switch. In a moment, I'll invite you to imagine your final days. I'll share a few stories. I'm going to give you some homework. (Don't worry. It's Pass/Fail. I'm kidding. It's not graded...)

Are you with me? Okay.

Part 2: Imagination/Meditation

Spend a few moments imagining with me. Imagine you've lived a really long and full life...and the end of your life is drawing near.

- Where would you like to be?
- Who will be there for you?
- What will they be saying to you or about you?
- How would you want that last month...or weeks...or days to be?

Think about how you've spent your time over these many years: Time with family. Time at work. Time at play. Time as a volunteer.

- What have people received from you? What's the contribution you have made?
- Looking back, how would you name your legacy?

I'm going to ask you to imagine one more thing: Your funeral.

- Who would attend?
- Who would speak?
- What stories would they share?
- How would you want it to look...to sound...to feel?

If we look carefully at what we've imagined our final days to be, we may notice that the pressures and the challenges that take up so much of our time and energy have moved to the periphery. They may not even be in the frame. Now in view are the people and the work and the conversations that we truly value and the relationships and the experiences that give us purpose.

On Yom Kippur, we confront our death so that we can choose a life in greater alignment with our values and our purpose.

How can we begin to make the changes today that will allow us to reach the moments we just imagined?

This is the work of Yom Kippur: to let this insight and wisdom guide our lives now and not just in our final days.

Part 3: Don't Wait.

Let's be honest, most of us wait until a crisis is upon us to make significant changes in our lives.

My father had a great life before he was diagnosed. He worked hard AND played golf every Wednesday. He loved photography, travel, and good food. He collected recipes from the New York Times and once a month our kitchen would become a gastronomy lab.

And when he was diagnosed, as most of us might do, he took account of his life – a **Cheshbon HaNefesh** – literally, an accounting of his soul. Which is exactly what we are asked to do on Yom Kippur. A Cheshbon HaNefesh invites us to take inventory: Are we wasting moments of our life or are we lifting up and celebrating what is most precious?

It was a blessing that he lived for 2.5 years. It gave him time to put papers in order. To transform his retirement as a physician into a final career as a teacher for his peers – he was often invited to reflect on the lessons he'd learned, as he'd like to say, “from the other side of the stethoscope.”

In his final days, cared for by hospice, he agreed to open up our family home to visitors. In what we now refer to as “The Pre-Shiva”, friends and colleagues came by throughout the week. They told stories. They offered apologies. They expressed their love. They said goodbye. It was a blessing for us all.

In a time and space of such vulnerability, he chose to open up and not to shut down; to reach out and not to retreat; to accept and not to reject. And, as a result, as my father loved to say, “it is (and was) possible to die healed and not cured.”

Yom Kippur is asking us to do that work today – to open up and not shut down; to reach out and not retreat. To let death be our teacher.

Our tradition teaches that with our final breath -- our final words should be a type of **Vidui: a prayer of confession**. Through this practice of repentance, we hope to die with a sense of wholeness and completion.

We are encouraged to confess out loud – to say Vidui out loud – *only* a few times in our lives. One time is on our deathbed. The other is Yom Kippur. We do this when we chant Al Chet and Ashamnu – when we tap our chests and awaken our hearts.

Yom Kippur liturgy is designed so that we confess now. We repent now. We forgive now and NOT just with our final breath, so that there is a chance we will LIVE with a sense of wholeness and completion.

Yom Kippur is crying out: Don't wait until the final moments of your life. Begin the work today.

Part 4: People Take Notes, So Should You

Over the years, I've had the honor of sitting with many families as they tell stories about a loved one who has died.

In the 10 years I've been officiating funerals, only once did a family walk in with a document from their loved one that said, "Here's what I hoped to teach you" or "Here's what I want you to remember..."

Most people do not write down their most precious teachings.

And so, in the absence of that document, I simply ask the family: "Tell me what you learned from your loved one." How did she live her life? How did he speak? How did she act? What was he trying to say even when he wasn't speaking?" *And most families can tell me:* She lit up every room she entered. There was always room for another seat at the table. He never wanted to be a burden.

A congregant³ recently shared with me the eulogy he delivered at his mother's funeral. He writes:

*My earliest memories were driving with her anywhere, she would swerve the car to pull over, open the trunk of her car, throw a rusty muffler or smashed coke can in the back, and we'd continue our drive **with little or no discussion of what just happened.** Some might think this was odd; it became normal for us, as we would then watch for months as she transformed these destroyed items into beautiful works of art...*

My eyes are opened wide because of [her] Neena, I can't help [but] to slow down past a tree with a unique shape, to look at the way paint is peeling off a building, to analyze the shell of a cicada and then look closer to marvel at its inherent design – this is from my mom...who will always be with me.

Here's the thing: I know I said, "People don't bring in documents..." but how we choose to live our lives is our document. Our family and friends notice what we do (and what we don't do) and they learn about our values, our desires, and our priorities. They notice and they remember...and someday they may speak about it.

So this is the time to ask yourself: Will my life teach the legacy I hope to leave? If not, this is the season for change.

³ Thank you to Matt Birch for sharing these words in honor of his mother, Neena Birch (z'l).

Part 5: Regret

In the 10 years I've been officiating funerals, I can also tell you that the hardest meetings are those filled with regret.

- Regret for not speaking sooner. For keeping quiet when we should have spoken aloud.
- Regret for speaking too much...about all the things that didn't actually matter...
- Regret for the moment we stopped speaking at all.

On Yom Kippur, I'm asking us to let death be our teacher.

As we reach the end of our lives, we may discover a reserve of generosity, compassion, and forgiveness -- even for those transgressions that seemed unforgiveable. Perhaps, there is a blessing of clarity and strength that comes to rest on the dying, allowing them to say: "I know what happened. That time has passed. I am okay now."

Or, perhaps, it is simply perspective: At the end of life, looking back, what was most important to us? What was worth fighting for? What was worth letting go?

Forgiveness gives us permission to let go. To spend our energy on what matters. To not waste our emotions on hatred or anger.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the legendary spiritual leader and composer of Jewish music, came to the United States from Austria as a teenager, a refugee from the Nazis. Every so often he would go back to Austria and Germany to give concerts, and people would ask him, "How can you go back there and give concerts? Don't you hate them after what they did to you? Don't you hate the Austrians and the Germans?"

And this is what Shlomo would say to anyone who asked him this question: "I only have one soul. If I had two souls, I would gladly devote one of them to hating the Germans full-time. But I don't. I only have one soul, and I'm not going to waste it on hating."⁴

⁴ Story excerpted from [This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared](#), Rabbi Alan Lew, p.230-231

Part 6: Your Homework

Okay. It's time for your homework.

Look, we know from past experience that Yom Kippur can be a profound moment but then we leave and we're back in the routine of our lives... And, somehow, even at the break-fast tonight, this very moment will feel distant. So, you might be thinking: "How am I going to maintain this perspective?"

Homework! (Don't worry about taking notes. All of our sermons will be available online.) Ready?

Assignment #1: Write an ethical will.

Now, for those of you paying attention, I know, I told you earlier, "How we choose to live our lives is our document." And that is true... I still want you to write an ethical will. Consider this a spiritual addition to your conventional will and hopefully your living will.

Ethical wills can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible first as an oral tradition, and in later generations, as written texts. It was and is an opportunity for people to share their values and teachings with loved ones – a document for future generations.

For example: Dvora Waysman, a writer in Israel, penned the following to her children:

I am at an age where I should write a will, but the disposition of my material possessions would take just a few lines. They do not amount to much...

...I have different things to leave you. I hope you will understand that they are more valuable than money in the bank, stocks and bonds, and plots of land, for no one can ever take them away from you.

I am leaving you the fragrance of a Jerusalem morning... (She goes on to describe the morning...)

I am leaving you an extended family – the whole house of Israel. They are your people. They will celebrate with you in joy and grieve with you in sorrow...

I am leaving you the faith of your forefathers...

I am leaving you pride...

I am leaving you memories...⁵

⁵ So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How To Prepare Them, ed. Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer, p. 88-89

Your homework assignment is simple – in your own style, with no rules of grammar or syntax to follow – spend some time recording your values and teachings. There’s no word limit. Do you think you can do this? Good!

Now, I should to tell you...the odds are against us completing this assignment. Despite Yom Kippur’s best attempts to send us into an existential crisis as we rehearse our death, we may still not feel a sense of urgency. We can always say, “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

So here’s my suggestion: Open up a Word Document tonight and label it “Yom Kippur Reflections” or “When I Die You Should Read This”.

Or, if you really want to make sure it gets read, title it: “Your Inheritance”.

Start writing. See it as a work in progress. You can add to it every year on Yom Kippur. It can become part of your spiritual practice. Honestly, you can add to it every day. Or maybe on Shabbat. Whenever you feel a moment of clarity...write down what matters most to you. I’m willing to bet, the minute you begin to write, it will start to have impact.

Assignment #2: Write a living will.

Write your own or search online for a document called “**5 Wishes**”⁶ that will give you an outline of choices. In addition to identifying a health care proxy and determining end-of-life treatment, you can also make decisions about your final days: How comfortable you’d like to be, how you’d like people to treat you, and what you want your loved ones to know.

Some of you have already completed this assignment; in which case, please encourage your friends and family to do the same.

Assignment #3: Have a conversation.

This is a different type of conversation than I normally promote. Who is at least one person you can talk to this year so that the possibility of regret is in some way diminished?

Maybe it’s a friend you had a falling out with...

Your sister didn’t handle your parent’s death very well...

Your son married someone you don’t like...

Try to call. Or email. Let go and reach out.

⁶ www.agingwithdignity.org/forms/5wishes.pdf

Assignment #4: Identify your teacher.

Whose death taught you how to live? For me, my primary teacher was my father, but there have been others along the way.

Who are your teachers and what lessons have they taught you?

What are they still trying to teach you, even now, as you anticipate and plan for the year to come?

Conclusion

One final story, about one of my favorite teachers:

Joe Gillerman, may his memory be a blessing, was a member of Temple Isaiah for many years. He brought his love for Jewish life and Jewish community to our Shabbat services, Torah Study, our Green Team, to name but a few...

A few months before he died, after yet another diagnosis was delivered, Joe and I got to talking in the lobby. "It's a lot, Joe," I said. "It's a lot of doctors, and a lot of opinions, and a lot of words that are hard to say aloud." And I paused, because really, it was me who was overwhelmed by the latest news.

And Joe, who seemed as though he'd been thinking about this for some time took my hands in his (he loved to hold people's hands), and he said: "You know what? I've been blessed."

"Barely been sick my entire life."

"And it's only now that I'm having these problems so I can't complain."

"Look at my life. Look at what I've done and who I know. I have a loving family, this community...I've lived a good life." And then he paused. And he looked at me through his large, round glasses, eyes shining, and he said:

"I don't want this to be the end, but, if it is...then it was a good life, right?"

**How do we choose life today,
so that when we face our death,
like Joe,
we can say, "It was a good life"?**

This is the work of Yom Kippur.

Shanah Tovah.

Epilogue

A student once asked her Rabbi... "Why does Torah tell us to place these words upon your hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?" The Rabbi thought for a moment and answered... "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."

On this holy day,
We pray for the strength, Adonai,
To let our hearts crack open...to let in these holy words

To let death be our teacher.

To let Joe be our teacher.

Help us to learn and in doing so, please God, help us to live. [Amen.]

Bonus Track:

An excerpt from Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

She began to make final preparations. From her bed she directed my mother to clean out the closets. “Papou’s clothes you can give to the Goodwill. My nice dresses, too. Now I only need something for to bury me...”

“Miltie,” she asked my father one day, “you bought for me the place next to papou?”

“Don’t worry, Ma. It’s a double plot.”

“Nobody they are going take it?”

“It’s got your name on it, Ma.”

“It no have my name, Miltie! That why I worry. It have papou’s name one side. Other side is grass only. I want you go put sign it says, this place is for yia yia. Some other lady maybe she die and try to get next to my husband.”

But her funeral preparations didn’t end there. Not only did Desdemona pick out her burial plot. She also picked out her mortician. Georgie Pappas, Sophie Sassoon’s brother who worked at the T. J. Thomas Funeral Home, arrived at Middlesex in April (when a bout of pneumonia was looking promising). He carried his sample cases of caskets, crematory urns, and flower arrangements out to the guest house and sat by Desdemona’s bed while she looked the photographs over with the excitement of someone browsing travel brochures. She asked Milton what he could afford.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Ma. You’re not dying.”

“I am no asking for the Imperial. Georgie says Imperial is top of line. But for yia yia Presidential is okay.”

“When the time comes, you can have whatever you want. But—“

“And satin inside. Please. And a pillow. Like here. Page eight. Number five. Pay attention! And tell Georgie leave my glasses.”

As far as Desdemona was concerned, death was only another kind of emigration. Instead of sailing from Turkey to America, this time she would be traveling from earth to heaven, where Lefty had already gotten his citizenship and had a place waiting.