

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768
At the Edge of the Abyss
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“Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” Joan Didion wrote these words after her husband died from a sudden, massive coronary event one night at dinner.

I read Joan Didion this year because I needed to better understand the experience of my friend Eitan, who lost his pregnant wife, partner, best friend, the mother of his precious and precocious 4 year old child, to a massive brain tumor, which had been discovered about 40 hours before she died in the ICU. Leah, a dear friend of mine and of many in our community, was 31, just finishing her PhD, struggling like so many of us to balance her professional aspirations with her instinctive need to be a good *ima*, wife and friend.

I read this book because I needed to understand what happens to a person when life as you knew it is inalterably changed, in an instant.

In the Talmud R. Eliezar teaches: "Repent one day before your death." His students, baffled, ask him, "But how can we possibly know when we'll die?" R. Eliezar replies: "All the more reason you should repent today, just in case you die tomorrow."¹

The great spiritual challenge of the holidays is that we come to recognize the fragility of life, the brevity and capriciousness of human existence -- but not in some distant, theoretical way. The challenge of HHD is to deal with the reality that the trajectory of our lives is radically unpredictable, and truly, as R. Eliezar said, every single day might be our last.

And so, the liturgy and rituals of these 10 days are designed to awaken us to the reality of our immortality. This is seen most vividly on Yom Kippur, when we dress in white, both the sign of spiritual purity and the foreshadowing of the day of our death, when we'll be buried in a tallit or kittel as a shroud; when we engage in a fast which is essentially a denial of all earthly needs: food, drink, sex, all of the things that make us feel like sociable, dignified human beings; when we reconnect with those we love who have died, through sharing memories at *yizkor*, the memorial service, and through lighting *yahrzeit* candles. But it begins on Rosh Hashannah, with the liturgy putting the finest point on it: remember us for life; please Gd -- inscribe us in the book of life... Like the shofar, the rituals and the liturgy come to jolt us out of our complacency: Wake up! You just might not be around for High Holy Days next year!

Many of us work to overcome the terror of the reality of death through avoidance and repression -- we simply couldn't function were we to live constantly conscious of this reality. So we watch Entourage and we say "thank Gd it wasn't any closer" when we hear of a tragedy in the community or the world. Ernest Becker, the master philosopher of death, writes that this instinct is entirely human, almost universally so. "[The fear of death] must be properly repressed to keep us living with any modicum of comfort. We know very well that to repress means more than to put away and to forget that which was put away and the place where we put it. It means also to maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness... Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever

1 Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 153a.

believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporal immortality. We are intent on mastering death... The affect of fear is repressed.”²

Others attempt to cheat death by trying to create some kind of structural permanence -- a building, for example, that will outlive them. Years ago I heard a rabbi use the awareness of the imminence of death as an appeal for his multi-million dollar building fund -- as if a plaque on the wall of a grand edifice would grant a person some measure of immortality.

There is well-known story of a rich and mighty man who was out walking in his garden when his servant came running to him deeply agitated. He reported that he had just encountered Death, who had threatened him menacingly. The servant begged his master to give him his fastest horse so that he could escape death and get out of town -- he would flee to Tehran. The master of course agreed, and the servant fled immediately to Tehran. As the master returned to his home, he too came upon Death. “Why did you terrify and threaten my servant?” he asked. “I did not threaten him” Death responded. “I just showed surprise in still finding him here when I was planning on meeting him tonight in Tehran.”

The problem, of course, is that it makes no more sense to try to ignore death than to try to outsmart it.

Ki afar anabnu -- for we are merely dust (Psalm 103:14). From dust we emerged, to the dust we will return. There is no avoiding it. The only choice we can legitimately make is to face the inevitability of death with a dedication to living a certain kind of life.

Some of you are familiar with the story of Amnon of Mainz -- the young 10th century German rabbi who was summoned by the Bishop of Mainz and offered a ministerial post on the condition that the Rabbi would renounce Judaism and convert to Christianity. When the Rabbi refused, the Bishop pressured him repeatedly until he requested three days to consider his offer.

Rav Amnon quickly became distraught that he had offered any indication that he would consider the Bishop's offer, which would have been a betrayal of Gd, the Jewish tradition, and his community. When the deadline for Rav Amnon's decision arrived, the Bishop had him forcibly brought before him. The Rabbi said, "I should have my tongue cut out for not having refused immediately." Full of rage, the Bishop had Rav Amnon's hands and feet cut off instead, and sent him home to suffer and die.

A few days later, on Rosh HaShanah, a weakened Rav Amnon asked to be carried to shul. He was placed on the bimah, and called out, with his dying breath: who will live and who will die? Those spontaneous, penetrating questions became the text of the most intense and profound piece of liturgy for RH and YK *Unetaneh Tokef*. The centrality of this prayer reflects that the Rabbis *knew* -- they had to -- that taking on this awareness was the essence of the religious and spiritual life. They wouldn't let us get away with denial and escapism, with meaningless distractions. They wouldn't let us succumb to the absurd sense that we could live beyond death because we put something down in bricks and mortar.

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Who is able to live with this awareness? How could we function if we were really awake to this reality? After a child died tragically in our neighborhood this summer, I spoke with one of the rabbis who was working to support the family. “What can I do to support *you*?” I asked. “Go home and hug your kids,” he said. And I did. I hugged them so hard I woke them both up. For an instant, I felt that awareness. I felt

2 Ernest Becker, in *Denial of Death*, quotes Zilboorg, *Fear of Death*, 1943 *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*.

the weight, the privilege and the burden, of having a love so rich in the world. I felt that I understood both the preciousness and the capriciousness of life.

That is precisely what we are asked to do during these 10 days. Our tradition, in all its wisdom, demands of us that we obliterate the false protective shelter, and knowing that each moment might be our last, fight for a life of meaning *today*. HHD force us to shift from denial of death to purposeful engagement with life.

Unetaneh Tokef climaxes with the words:

u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah hagzeirah --
return, prayer, justice can avert the severity of the decree.

We can't dictate our fate. We can't hide from death. But there are *three things*, said a very wise, dying Rabbi in the 10th century, there are three things that each of us can do to bring meaning into the uncertainty of our lives.

teshuvah: You don't have to be a static, stagnant being, dwelling perpetually in the mistakes of years past. You can choose to make *teshuvah*, affirming that life is dynamic and people change. Find the courage to ask for forgiveness from the people you have hurt. Find the strength to forgive those who have hurt you. Find the audacity to forgive yourself. Open your heart and embrace the people around you -- most importantly those you most often take for granted. Hug your kids. And your parents.

tefillah: You don't have to feel alone in a world spun out of control. You can choose to see yourself as part of a cosmic story, one that is bigger than you, one in which God and the soul are the critical currency, not money, power, celebrity. Value the spirit, not only the wallet. Let beauty distract you, open your heart to pain. Let the world take your breathe away. Connect to something beyond the physical, the tangible, the utterly graspable. Allow yourself not to know -- live in mystery.

tzedakah: You don't have to get further and further entrenched in your own dramas, denying that the privileges of freedom and prosperity come with real responsibility to those who don't have what we have. You can choose to open your eyes and your heart to those who are tortured by illness, poverty, loss and violence. Affirm the power of love! Bring healing and comfort! Affirm *your* stake in the world!

These three things will not save us from cancer, they cannot protect us from terror. In fact, scholars have found that in one medieval manuscript the prayer was actually recorded as: *u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah mivatlin et ro'ah hagzeirah* -- return, prayer, justice can nullify the decree. But this version of the prayer did not survive -- the Rabbis couldn't stomach the false promise that doing good things would make you live a long time. They couldn't bare the implications: that those who die must have done something wrong -- the kind of theology that drove a group of rabbis to check the scrolls of the mezuzot in the homes of the 73 soldiers who were killed when two Israeli helicopters collided midair in 1997. They couldn't perpetuate the theology that led religious leaders of all persuasions to argue that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans to punish people for living indecent and empty lives. No, they wouldn't allow us to believe that there was a formula, a panacea that would ensure long healthy lives. But they needed to make sure that we understood that we are not powerless in the face of the capriciousness of life; that we can't ensure long lives but we *can* live lives of meaning, purpose and celebration. So the prayer says instead: *u'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah hagzeirah* -- return, prayer, justice can *avert* the severity of the decree. The decree cannot be changed. But you have the power to make for yourselves a life worth living.

Several people asked me this year if I'd be talking about the Secret -- the astonishing revelation of the secret to unlimited joy, health, money, relationships, love, youth: everything you have ever wanted (for only \$29.95 on DVD). I have some friends who once offered to write the Jewish version of the Secret, called, of course: The Power of Negative Thinking. But I digress.

I believe that the Jewish secret is embedded in these holidays, and that if we are open to receiving the message, it has the power to radically change the way that we live. Judaism presents us with a great dialectic: on the one hand, to remember that our lives are momentary and finite and can be taken from us at any moment; on the other, to affirm our unique value as human beings, to recognize our ability to affect change in our lives and the world, to love with every ounce of our being. This annual encounter with death is designed to motivate us to break through our routines, our stagnation, to shock our system out of its instinctive selfishness and indulgence. It is designed to compel us to ask ourselves, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches: "If my life ended now, would it have been worthwhile?"

I know for my friend Leah, the answer to that question was YES! To love with all your heart, to believe with unflinching faith, to sing without inhibition -- this is a life worth living. The question for all of us: is ours?

For many of us, it is only when we wake up to the horror and inevitability of death that we will begin to touch the beauty and the profundity of life. We will devote Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur this year to exploring the three paths that Rav Amnon directs us toward if we are to live a life of purpose and meaning.

It is my prayer for all of us that this journey from the edge of the abyss back to life will help us live more passionately and creatively, that it will reveal to us the depths of our own potential as human beings. May we commit to a year of *teshuvah*- healing, a year of *tefillah*- soulful encounter, and a year of *tzedakah*- the brazen, unapologetic pursuit of justice. May we recognize that though we cannot live forever, while we are here we can and must choose to consecrate our lives, to make them lives worth living. That would surely be something to celebrate.

Shanah tovah.