

Yizkor 5780 Pesach

Everyone knows that we have to practice social distancing right now, although I hate that phrase. But there is another more insidious kind of distancing happening, one Jennifer Senior writes about in her column in the Times earlier this week. I might call it death distancing.

You hear about, for instance, a person your own age who died of COVID-19. The mind quickly races and questions multiply: did they have some kind of underlying condition? Were they a smoker? Perhaps fighting cancer? We want to know somehow that this story won't be our story, that what happened to them won't happen to us.

Senior writes about a certain David Lat, 44 years old, a lawyer, who was stricken with COVID 19 and on a ventilator for a time. He is now thankfully recovering and he has tweeted extensively about his experience. But he reports receiving many queries about his own health from followers on twitter, probing the hidden reasons why he might have fallen ill. People were particularly interested in his exercise-induced asthma, as if it explained something. Never mind that he has run 2 marathons, that he exercises regularly and is in good health in every other way — normal weight, normal blood pressure, doesn't smoke. He wrote, "I have definitely had people trying to psychologically distance themselves from me and my case but I haven't been surprised by these reactions — partly because, truth be told, i used to engage in them too."

This phenomenon is not confined to a pandemic. Most of us engage in it sometimes — you read about teens dying in a car accident and tell yourself that your child would not have been in that situation. You hear about someone who got some terrible disease and you reassure yourself — they are older than you, they are overweight, they have a history of cancer in their family — whatever. It's a way we control our fear by imagining we have some control over the situation. And it's some kind of perverse theology in which we believe that somehow people get their just desserts. It's interesting that the Bible portrays Job's friends in that light. They sought to persuade Job that his suffering was his own fault, that he must have sinned, but in the end, they offer no comfort. They only succeed in distancing themselves from their friend when he needs them to draw close.

When Hallel fell and nearly died, there was a part of me that thought — this happens to other people — not to me — as if somehow my charmed life would be immune to suffering. I had locked the doors and counted the cholesterol and maintained my weight and come to a full stop at stop signs and taught my children well — these things were not supposed to happen to me!

In *The Plague*, Camus describes Dr. Rieux's reaction to the first signs of plague: "Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from the blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take

people equally by surprise....” Dr. Rieux contemplates the evidence of mounting illness before him but dismisses it, staring out the window at a beautiful spring afternoon, listening to the comforting sound of the street car going by and hearing the sounds of workman in the distance, finding a deceptive certitude in the comfort of ordinary life. The town was too ordinary, life too busy and consuming, everything going about its normal business — a plague couldn’t happen here.

We cling to normalcy and pretend that it can’t be disrupted, that the bad thing can’t happen to us.

But it is delusional and dangerous. Consider the President’s mantra for weeks: “The risk to the average American is low” meaning somehow that older Americans weren’t average and neither were smokers or people with heart disease or diabetes, or as it turns out African-Americans or Latinos or the homeless or the poor. When young people continue to frolic on Florida beaches on spring break they are practicing the very same death- distancing — it can’s possibly happen to me and I am oblivious and indifferent to the many people to whom I might spread it.

It may be the case that America is, unique among cultures, built on the denial of death. We worship the young and spend billions of dollars to make ourselves look younger, while only featuring people under 50 in movies and commercials. We compare our own aging skin to photoshopped images made even more lovely by lighting and surgery and wonder why our appearance falls short. When people die, we don’t mourn their death at sober funerals — we hold “celebrations of life.” Even at funerals, particularly non-Jewish funerals, the dead are often prettied up to look beautiful while everyone comments on how well they look; the caskets are not buried but rather dropped off at the cemetery as if it were some night deposit box at the bank; and fake grass carefully covers the hole in which the casket will be lowered. Even death itself has become a stranger — not that long ago people died at home and children, from a young age, witnessed death. Today people mostly die in hospitals and nursing homes where we keep death walled off in its special place so it doesn’t intrude on us.

But it is very clear that what is called for now and what has always been needed is the opposite — we need to open our hearts to the dying and the dead. Never has it been clearer — we are all in this together — in this pandemic and in this world, a world of great beauty but also pain, a world where people are born and die. We are all vulnerable to sickness and death or, as they say, no one makes it out alive. And facing death squarely — not obsessively but at least clearly and honestly — makes our very lives possible. Only because there is death is there the possibility of new life, whether on the forest floor or among humans. In Greek mythology, Tithonus is granted eternal life but discovers that it is a curse. It turns out that the fact that we can’t put anything off forever drives us to accomplish things, to marry less than perfect mates, to have children even before we have attained professional success, material security, or sufficient doses of wisdom and patience, to write, to paint, to build, to dream. In the Amichai poem we looked at last week, Amichai says Change is God and Death is his prophet. It is death, the single greatest change we experience as we lose loved ones

and ultimately find ourselves bending toward the grave, it is death that demonstrates beyond question that change we must and change we will. Death, the most permanent of changes, teaches us that everything changes.

And so I am very glad that we say yizkor and that we say it at this moment because yizkor connects us to death. Yizkor connects us to the death of those we loved, and we feel both the pain of their loss and the enduring nature of their love. Yizkor connects us to the great chain of life, reminding us that we are part of nature, that everything is born, and everything dies, and so will we. Yizkor connects us to all those who came before us and all who will come after. And yizkor connects us to our own death, flickering perhaps in the background, but there nonetheless.

I think that that perspective is enormously important to hold right now. On the one hand, as you think about your ancestors — everyone who came before you, everyone who said yizkor and for whom it was said and God-willing everyone who will come after you, you realize that you are tiny and the universe is vast. As the psalmist says, our lives are but a passing shadow, a broken shard, a withering blade of grass. And yet yizkor also connects us to how we will be remembered, to how we want to live our lives so that our legacy will live on, so that one day someone will say yizkor for us and remember us with love and affection. When we say yizkor we acknowledge both the smallness of our lives and their infinite significance.

I think that it is from this expanded place — *min ha metzar karati yah, v'anani b'mrehav yah* — I called to God from the narrow place, from my suffering, and he answered from the expanse — it is from that expansive place that we can hold with compassion all those who are suffering right now. We can realize that there is no over there where death is happening or other people who are dying — it is everywhere and it is us. We are all mortal and no one is immune. We can, from this expanded place, let our hearts break, and in our broken-heartedness find healing and redemption. In the broken cracks, the light comes in.

In a long article in Sunday's Times, Nicholas Kristof wrote about conditions in two New York hospitals right now — the sickness, the death, the exhaustion, the fear, the isolation. He concludes, though, by saying, "What is most impressive in the hospitals is not the ventilators, CT scanners or other high-tech wizardry. It's the compassion and courage of health workers, and the intervention that struck me the most was decidedly low-tech — the hand holding." Kristof goes on to describe an email sent out by the head of the residency program for the emergency rooms of the two hospitals he was writing about. This doctor, Michael P Jones, instructed his residents that when they are sitting with someone close to death, to, "Take a few moments if you can to talk about patient's families, their lives, their dreams. Ask if there is a loved one you can call. And lastly, two very difficult things: Hold your patient's hand as they near death or pass, and ask your entire team to stop for five or 10 seconds, bow their heads, state the patient's name, and ask for silence." "This", he wrote, "helps us retain our humanity in times of such crisis and gives our patients' families some solace that they were treated with dignity."

Saying yizkor today, I think accomplishes something similar. It connects to all those who are dying right now and who have died. It forces us to realize that our fate is joined with theirs, that our lives will also pass into dust. But, in saying yizkor, we also bring dignity to their lives and in so doing, we bring humanity to our own. Our lives are finite but we are joined to everyone who came before us and everyone who came after us; we are deeply part of the entire natural world, in which everything is born and everything dies; we are not separate from death or from those who are dying. We are intimately connected, and in that fact alone, and in acknowledging it today, lies tremendous strength, dignity, and hope. Yizkor helps us maintain the bridge to death, to all those who have died, and to the reality of our own death, and to maintain it with love, humility, honesty, and compassion. A practice we need at all times, and most especially at this one.