

The Reality of Mortality
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"The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

--Mark Twain

I recently discovered that I am dying. Never mind the heart-healthy diet, the regular walks and hiking trips I take, that I've never been a smoker. The online calculator tells me that I have lived 61 percent of my life already and that I will probably die in the year 2049. The calculator adds that there is a .4 percent chance of my dying next year. (So for anyone whose wedding or bar/bat mitzvah I have promised to officiate, if I'm taken to the next world and therefore am indisposed, I will be truly sorry.)

All kidding aside-- and I'm sure that some of us here treat this subject as deadly serious-- Yom Kippur is the day that calls us to contemplate our lives in anticipation of our eventual deaths. It asks us that most primordial question put to Adam in the Garden of Eden: "Ayeka? Where are you?" It demands us to answer its corollaries: "What have you done with your life?" and "What shall you do with the rest of it?"

Unstated but implicit in these questions is the assumption that life is a blessing, that it is finite, and that it must never be wasted. That perhaps the greatest thing that may be said of us someday will be the posthumous benediction, "*Zichrono/a livracha*. May his or her memory be a blessing."

I think that the power of these questions and the seriousness of purpose that we bring to them are what makes this day so dear to us. Think about it: the one day on which we abstain from food, drink, and entertainment; the one day we sit in shul praying, learning, listening, reflecting, discussing, and maybe even sleeping exceeds every festival except Pesach in how widely it is observed. *Mi K'amcha Yisrael?* What a strange people we are, we Jews. We attach such importance to life and death that we set aside a day every year to consider them.

Rabbi Arthur Green says that all of Judaism is an attempt to respond to the primordial *Ayeka/Where are you?* That the mitzvah to know God and to bring Torah out into the world is our fulfillment of the *brit* -- our divine mission -- our answer. But I think the unspoken essence of Judaism is also to prepare us for the day on which we die; to assure us of being able to answer the *Ayeka/Where are you?* question in a way that we look back on lives as meaningful, worthwhile and unwasted. I therefore think the unspoken essence of Judaism is to equip us such that when death does finally approach,

we can face it with equanimity and without fear, without denial and without pretending.

It used to be that life was very much a matter of death and that death was very much a fact of life. Every third or even every second person born could be expected to die in the first five years of life. The average life expectancy at birth was a mere 35, an expectancy that held steady more or less until the onset of the industrial era. In 1800 the country with the highest average life expectancy was Belgium, at just 40 years!

And so, for nearly everyone, death was up close and personal. Generations of families crowded together in one house, sometimes taking turns using their beds. There were no hospitals, much less rehabilitation centers and long-term care facilities, so people lived and died at home. There were no mortuaries either, so bodies were kept and prepared for burial at home, some times on the dining table.

Today, not even the lowest ranking of the 207 or so countries in the world has a life expectancy of 40. Worldwide, average life expectancy has doubled since the year 1900, from 35 to 70 -- and even more so in wealthier countries like the U.S., Israel and Japan. So while we still see the blessing "May you live to 120" as a reach, no longer can we view it as far-fetched. Notwithstanding Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Moses, we are living longer than our forebears did.

[When the oldest man in the world died last month, he was 113. A Holocaust survivor no less, Israel Krystal had celebrated his bar mitzvah at his synagogue in Israel only eleven months earlier. Until then, apparently, he never found the time.]

As people have come to live longer, more of them die in hospitals rather than at home -- fully 80 percent here in the U.S. Which means that death has become less common, and more compartmentalized and removed today from everyday life. In some ways it has been outsourced to professionals: doctors, nurses, home health care workers, morticians, and clergy. Unlike many of our forebears, who I imagine witnessed deaths in all kinds of ways -- violence, accidents, disease, war -- only once outside of my professional life have I actually seen a death. It happened in the middle the Petticoat Lane Flea Market in East London back in 1988 when a man, as they say, just dropped dead a few feet from me. But once upon a time, I suppose that was not an uncommon sight.

It is therefore not surprising to have detailed instructions in the corpus of Jewish law about what to do with someone after they've died -- from closing their eyelids, to covering them, to the direction their feet should face in relation to the doorway before being carried off by the community for burial. Underlying those instructions was the ingrained assumption that, no matter the circumstances, one's loved one was never to be left alone.

Nor was it unusual to see people preparing themselves and their loved ones for their demise matter of factly and with dignity. As Sherwin Nuland writes, "In ages past, the

hour of death *was*, insofar as circumstances permitted, seen as a time of spiritual sanctity, and of a last communion, with those being left behind. The dying expected this to be so, and it was not easily denied them. It was their consolation and the consolation of their loved ones for the parting and especially for the miseries that had very likely preceded it. For many, this last communion was the focus not only of the sense that a good death was being granted them but of the hope they saw in the existence of God and afterlife."

That matter-of-fact dignity: we see it in Jacob just prior to his own demise. Summoning all his strength, the old man pulls himself up in bed to announce the fate of his descendants and to bless his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe. And then he tells Joseph, "*Hinei, Ani meit* - I am about to die, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers" (Deut. 48:2-4, 8-9, 21). The Torah adds, "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people" (Genesis 49:33).

Our ancestor Jacob Avinu's serene acceptance of death, surrounded by his children, contrasts markedly with the sad and lonely death experienced by Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich a century and a quarter ago. There the 45-year-old bureaucrat, injured in a fall off a stepladder, faces death alone, since his friends and colleagues now avoid him, and his wife and doctors pretend he will recover. This, Tolstoy writes, more than the pain itself, caused Ivan Ilyich most of his suffering.

Ivan Ilyich's chief torment was a lie - the lies somehow accepted by everyone, that he was only sick, but not dying, and that he needed only to be calm, and trust to the doctors, and then somehow he would come out alright. But he knew that, whatever was done, nothing would come of it, except still more excruciating anguish and death. And the lie tormented him; it tormented him that they were unwilling to acknowledge what all knew as well as he knew, but preferred to lie to him about his terrible situation, and made him also a party to the lie. This lie, this lie, it clung to him, even to the very evening of his death; this lie, tending to reduce the strange, solemn act of his death to the same level as visits, curtains, sturgeon for dinner--it was a horribly painful for Ivan Ilyich. And strange! many times, when they were playing this farce for his benefit, he was within a hair's breath of shouting at them: 'Stop you're foolish lies! You know as well as I do that I am dying, and so at least stop lying.'

But he never had the spirit to do this.

And so poor Ivan Ilyich died alone.

I imagine that we all have friends or relatives like Ivan Ilyich's. Uncomfortable with mortality or fearing being at a loss for words, they disappear, or pretend, or deny the reality of mortality. And then there are those who, like Jacob's sons, show up to help their father die, satisfied and at peace.

One of the great debts I owe my father, of blessed memory, is that he taught me how to die. From my earliest years, whenever the topic of death would come up, he never shrank from it, never sugarcoated it, always approached it directly and with integrity. As he grew older, he even grew nonchalant at referring to his own mortality--too much so sometimes for my mother, my sister and me, but today I think I understand why. Born into privilege but later raised in an orphanage, he was acutely aware how life can change in an instant. He wanted to prepare us, and he wanted a death more like Jacob's than Ivan Ilyich's. And eight years ago, at age 82, he got it.

A couple of years ago, humanity and the Jewish people lost another 82- year old: Dr. Oliver Sacks. Acclaimed equally as a neurologist and author, Dr. Sacks' last great acts were to prepare himself, his lover Billy, and his innumerable friends and admirers for his imminent demise. Announcing his terminal cancer in an Op-Ed piece, Dr. Sacks wrote:

"A month ago, I thought that I was in good health, even robust health. At 81 I still swim a mile a day. But my luck has run out – a few weeks ago I learned that I have multiple metastases in the liver... It is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, most productive way I can."

Dr. Sacks continued:

"Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, with the deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life. On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.

"This will involve audacity, clarity and plain speaking; trying to straighten my accounts with the world. But there will be time, too, for some fun (and even some silliness, as well) . . .

"I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and traveled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world, the special intercourse of writers and readers.

"Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure."

In his final Op-ed piece a month before his death, Dr. Sacks reflected on his Orthodox upbringing, his estrangement from Judaism on account of his being gay, of his reconciliation with his Orthodox family in Israel, and how his experience there of the

"peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infus[ing] everything" - and how that experience "drenched [him] with wistfulness."

He concluded, "And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, 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 is well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest."

Mark Twain once remarked, "The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

So it was that Oliver Sacks and Jacob our forefather, who lived very full lives, could depart their lives in peace. So it was that Ivan Ilyich, surrounded by the lies of others, could not.

In this new year, I pray, for all of us, that our work is not yet done and that each of us here will be blessed with another year of life. But all the same, I pray that we will all use this holy day, this Sabbath of Sabbaths, as it is meant to be used: to gaze backward on our lives so we can face our inevitable future with maturity, serenity and peace.

Amen.