Will You Be Immortal?
Kol Nidre 2015
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INTRODUCTION

What do you think is the most frequently asked question of a rabbi?

You might think it is deeply theological, such as, “How did we get here, and what is our purpose on earth?” But, it’s not that.

You might think it is moral quandary, like, “Can I be buried in a Jewish cemetary if I have a tattoo?” But that, too, is not the most frequently asked question.

You might think it obvious, something that could be looked up, but is easier to ask the rabbi, as in, “When is the first night of Chanukah”?

And of course, you might think it is more practical, such as, “To whom should I make out that three million dollar check for The Temple?” While I’d like to get asked that question a little more regularly, none of the above questions holds the number one slot. The number one question, it turns out, is hardly every discussed in sermons, in prayers, or in dinner conversations. The question most often asked of a rabbi each year, without fail, more than any other question is deep and profound and has been asked since Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden.

In fact, it is the same question that Job famously asked thousands of years ago: IM YAMUT, GEVER HA-YICH – When a person dies, will he or she live again?”

On this, the holiest night of the year, I wish to explore with you this timeless question.
I. **What does our tradition say about life after death?**

For starters, we are not the first ones to raise the question. The Romans displayed human skeletons on festive occasions and used to instruct the revelers to enjoy life while they can. The ancient Egyptians carried around open coffins containing the embalmed remains of a human being to show that this was how they all would look one day.

But this is not the Jewish way. From our tradition, we believe *both* that – life is short, and therefore, we should enjoy it as much as possible – and, that precisely because it is short and unpredictable, we should dedicate our lives to sacred and worthy goals.

We didn’t pluck these ideas out of thin air. They come from thousands of years of great Jewish thinking. You may be surprised to learn that while the Bible describes many details about death – there is no mention, not even a hint, about life after death. The Bible actually introduces to the world (in contrast to ancient Egypt) the notion that it is THIS world that matters. None of our biblical ancestors – Abraham, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, King David, Deborah – none of them talked about a belief that the body or soul continues in an afterlife. For our matriarchs and patriarchs, life itself was its own reward.

It wasn’t until the early centuries that the Pharisees and Sadducees began debating the topic. The Sadducees accepted the Torah as the word of God, and they did not believe in the hereafter. The Pharisees, on the other hand, envisioned a world in which God restored the dead to life. For these rabbis, both this world and the afterlife were core to Jewish belief.

We have no clear account why the early rabbis readily accepted the belief in an afterlife – except to say that they did. Perhaps, it is because the rabbis saw God as a God of justice, a doer of righteousness, and a fair judge. When they looked at the world around them, they saw a world where justice and righteousness did not reign. Belief in an afterlife gives God a second opportunity to do justice. It sets the
world straight. Whatever was not known or forthcoming in this world could be available to the soul in perpetuity.

There is a Yiddish expression that says, “Every person knows he or she will die, but no one believes it.” Belief in an afterlife is a strong motivation to refrain from actions we might otherwise get away with, actions that nobody on earth would ever know.

Over time, three primary thoughts about the afterlife have emerged. To understand these concepts, imagine a beloved family member or dear friend – a person you truly love and admire who is no longer living on Earth.

The first idea is that the soul is immortal and it returns to God in the messianic era. We call it techiyat ha-maytim. The essence of this person that we so love and admire comes back to God and lives again. Many Reform Jews understand this concept as Chayay Olam – the conservation of soul energy - that the soul returns to God who gave it. The rabbis understood that we have limited understanding available to us and that the prophets would offer guidance.

The second idea is that this wonderful person we are now imagining now finds expression in a new body. We call it gelgul neshamot – reincarnation. This notion, while not in the Bible and Talmud, dates back as early as the Maccabean revolt and takes root in the 12th century. It is the idea that after death, the soul could take on life again, this time in a new body.

And the third idea is that this beloved person you have known and loved – the one you are imagining today, comes back, but now in God’s great care. When the rabbis envision “heaven,” not surprisingly, they see it as a giant yeshiva, a study hall, where the students feed the hungry, clothe the naked, look after orphans, and consume themselves with acts of kindness. Sitting in the Yeshiva on High, we have the privilege of learning with Moses and the prophets. It is the permission of this heavenly Yeshiva that we ask before we chant the Kol Nidre prayer.
There is no hell in Jewish tradition, only Gehenna – deriving from the Valley of Hinnom – a valley that still exists in Jerusalem today. It is really a state of mind, more than a place. It is the moment outside of time when a person sees before her or him all the experiences of evil from life. Like the contemporary idea that when we die, we see a movie that summarizes our life. The function of Ghenna is to help the soul get rid of the bad stuff that defiled us in life. It is a soul purification process. In this manner, the soul can improve its feelings towards both God and other human beings. This image suggests that there is an organization to eternity and a plan for heaven.

Although there are three separate ideas about life after death, they are interconnected. The thread that unites all three images is that there is something immortal in store for each of us – some manner in which we live forever. Death does not end everything for us. Instead, we picture the beautiful image of the soul ascending by way of a River of Light – elevating the spirit so that the soul may know God and enjoy more spiritual intimacy. There are many books on the NY Times bestseller list that describe near death experiences and talk about this River of Light.

From these rabbinic beliefs, and more, emerges a rich liturgical canon which puts immortality at the forefront: the gevurot blessing in the Amidah and Maimonides 13 Principles of Faith – both of which state that the dead will be brought back to life, and the popular closing hymn, Yigdal, which praises God for bringing the dead to life.

II. **It is still our central question and we tend to avoid it**

So, if it is such a deep part of our tradition, if questions about life after death are the most asked of rabbis and appear all over our prayer book --- why don’t we ever talk about them much?

Some will say that because of the increasingly heavy emphasis placed on the afterlife in Christian faith, our ancestors began to be less speculative about what happens after death. I don’t buy it.
Others choose a more scientific answer: If we can’t prove it (meaning if nobody has come back to describe it) – why talk about it in the first place? Such reasoning does not deny the possibility; it just keeps it at bay, on the backburner. I don’t buy that either.

The answer, I submit to you, is that discussing life after death forces us to talk about two things we are generally uncomfortable talking about: death and God. William F. Buckley once said – if you go to a cocktail party in New York you can talk about anything you want: politics, sex, you name it. But, if you talk about God more than once, you won’t be invited back.

Tonight, as your rabbi, I want to open up to you not only what our tradition says about the subject of mortality, but my own personal views as well.

III We can reverse death

Tonight, I want to share with you my profound belief – that there really is a life after death. I believe it as strongly as I believe anything. I believe it because my life experiences, my feelings, and my tradition affirm it. It is inconceivable to me that this world, created so precisely, is all there is, that God’s purpose in creating the world and human beings is to allow us to exist for a short time and then end it all at whatever moment God chooses. My belief is that each of us, you and I, has the power to live forever and to achieve immortality. The power to reverse death lies within each of us.

Miguel de Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher, writes in his book, Tragic Sense of Life that “no logical proof of immortality exists, but you should spend your life so that you deserve to be immortal.” In other words, we do not have any control of what happens after death, but we do have some control of what happens in this life. And, if we manage to bring light into this world, perhaps one day we shall be privileged to peek over the horizon.

What is this power, this immortality, about which I am so convicted?
**First, I believe in the immortality of generosity.** To be truly generous means you share your time, your money, your memory – in short – your best self - to help others. I’m talking about people who are there for us when we truly and desperately need them. They sit with us for hours in the hospital. They make no judgments, but love us when we hurt. All of those who comforted us when we were blindsided by life are immortal. For some, it is a teacher who believed in us, a friend who had faith in us or mentored us. These people are in our minds and hearts – forever! These people live on because they gave, truly of themselves and became part of the life of the universe.

We grant to others and guarantee for ourselves life eternal when we live in such a way that we are worthy of remembrance. Kindness and generosity can sound so trite, but don’t underestimate their power. Rabbi Heschel once said, “When I was very young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people.”

As we approach the 150\(^{th}\) anniversary of our Temple, I think especially of the generous individuals who established and maintained this historic congregation, who helped to build a Jewish cemetery for the indigent and to support the cause of civil rights, to forge relationships and support causes in the community, and to provide sanctuary to the homeless and the exploited. I also think of those who have helped to sustain The Temple in perpetuity through the largest endowment campaign in Georgia’s synagogue history. We are people who continually strengthen The Temple every day through worship, study, and deeds of justice.

Yes, the power to assure our immortality is to use the power we have to bring about life everlasting, to be kinder and more generous to others.

**Second, I believe in the immortality of example.** You have heard it said that you learn much more about individuals from the examples they set than what they say. We achieve immortality when another person, perhaps a child or grandchild incorporates our very being into her or himself. My grandfather used to say, “Don’t think you are better than anyone else.” It wasn’t his words that taught me the importance of humility, it was the way he treated others that had an impact.
Think about the martyrs of our time. Nelson Mandela, for instance, did not just say, “All people should have equal representation.” He lived his life adhering to this belief. When we live in hearts that are left behind, we cannot die. When we recite yizkor tomorrow, we prove without a shadow of a doubt, that immortality exists in this world. We build our houses not just for ourselves. “The great use of life,” says William James “is to spend it on something that will outlast it.”

Third, I believe in the immortality of community. We are all builders of the causes we care the most about. When I sit in the pews on the holy days, I walk back into time to the flashes of memory of those who made my being here possible. My ancestors, like many of yours, risked everything to find freedom in a new country. None of us lives in vain. We all contribute, whether to Jewish life, to interfaith activities, to improving our city or government, or to giving back to artistic life or scientific advancement, to name just a few. And when we do --- we attain a degree of immortality and build on the ideas and progress that came before.

Fourth, I believe in the immortality of the Jewish people. Our Jewish tradition outlasts any one person. I feel as if I were with the generation who fled Egypt for the cause of freedom, that I stood arm and arm with my ancestors to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, that I experienced the agony of the Holocaust, and marched arm in arm with Dr. King. Each of these events and the people who championed them, contribute to the lives we lead today. As a member of this Jewish people, I feel immortal.

Leon Wiesseltier tells the story of how he was working late in the office one night when he called his sister. She was putting the children to bed. She says to Leon, “I want you to hear what my little boy has learned in school.” She gives him the phone, and Leon hears a tiny, eager voice reciting syllable by syllable the prayer before bedtime. “These are my son’s first Hebrew words. What do you think?” his sister asks. Wiesseltier responds, “I think that Hitler lost.”
And finally, and perhaps most importantly – I believe in the immortality of you and those you love and in the life of faith and the heart of God. I believe that there is no lost good.

CONCLUSION

On this holiest night of the year, we come together to acknowledge the transience of our lives. Yom Kippur is our confrontation with our own mortality.

And yet, Yom Kippur reminds us every year that the answer to Job’s question – if a person dies, will he or she live again? – is a resounding and emphatic YES. Our Jewish tradition teaches that the soul DOES live on, even as the details are not always available to us.

But, we also believe that we can live on in our generous deeds, in our devotion to family, in the example we set for others, in the work we do to better our world, and in our adherence to the ideals set forth by God. We live on in the lives we lead, the people we touch, the children we bear and raise, and the acts we perform which change the world. The only thing of which we can be certain is that each of us has the opportunity to live a life in what Rabbi Harold Schulweiss calls the “immortality of influence.”

We are truly blessed, to serve a God who is greater than ourselves. God’s greatest gift to us is the gift of immortality. We are blessed to choose between creating a life that counts not only now but for eternity or a cold and final death. On Yom Kippur, we consider—how do you want to be remembered? Will it be for generosity of spirit? Will it be for the example you set for others? Will it be for your contribution to our community? Will it be your link to the Jewish people?

Let each of us, this night, consider not only how to live a better life but how that life will matter after we are gone.

Let each of us, this New Year; serve the ideals of the past and the dreams of the future through what we do each moment, in the present. Amen.