

Would you want to know the date of your death?

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I remember so many stories of the Lower East Side that my grandmother used to tell me. When she was a little girl, she lived with her parents in a cold water flat. That's an apartment with no running hot water. There were no showers either. I remember my grandmother telling me about how her mother would "draw a bath," which was an expression for heating up water to fill a bathtub. I remember as a little child trying to imagine what that kind of life was like...picturing my grandmother and her parents huddled around a stove in the dead of winter, trying to stay warm, because those cold water flats didn't have central heat either.

I was transported back to that neighborhood, with streets named Canal and Orchard, Delancey and Essex, as I opened the pages of Chloe Benjamin's NY Times bestseller, *The Immortalists*. In the same stomping grounds of grandmother's old neighborhood, the book describes four Jewish kids, siblings, a 13 year old, an 11 year old, a 9 year old, a 7 year old in search of some adventure, something to occupy their time in the middle of a sweltering New York City summer. The four siblings hear of a mysterious woman living in a fifth floor efficiency on Hester Street. The old Romani woman, it is said, has the power to tell you the precise date of your death. They decide to seek out the fortune teller, and trek up the five flights of stairs and one-by-one visit with her. As promised, she tells each of them the day, month, and year of their death. Without giving away too much more of the story—in case you're looking for your book club's next selection—the novel proceeds to examine how possessing that information effects each of these children as they go through the remainder of their lives, be they short lives or longer ones. And the essential questions the author wants readers to wrestle with are (1) if you could somehow have that information, would you want to know the date of your death? And, (2) if you did know that date, how would it change or inform the way you live your life leading up to it? Would it be helpful information or destructive? Do you think it would give you a sense of calm or unmitigated terror?

As you might have guessed, Judaism does not look favorably on this kind of speculation. The Torah instructs us not to go to soothsayers or consult with mediums. We are told not to pay attention to divination or sorcery, or to place much stock in astrology or omens. Imagine the surprise of the travelers on our recent Har Shalom Israel mission when we arrived at Beit Alpha, the sixth century synagogue in Beit She'an in the Galilee, with remarkably well preserved mosaic floors. In the central panel of that exquisite 1,500 year old floor is an elaborate Zodiac wheel, complete with Helios, the Greco-Roman sun god smack dab in the middle. This is in a shul; in the sanctuary! Though our Sages and sacred texts tried to forbid it, our ancestors still derived meaning and comfort from astrology. In fact, it is still the case now. I can't tell you how many people asked me, following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg last week whether it is considered a good omen to die on Rosh Hashanah. The idea of any omen, good or bad, is an attempt to make sense of loss, to help us cope with the mystery of death. Even the Talmud admits in two different places that if you want to know whether you'll live for another year, then between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur you should light a long-burning candle in a non-drafty room. If the candle continues to burn without being extinguished, you can be assured that you will live at least another year. The great Israeli religious historian Daniel Sperber notes that if the altar candle burned out by itself in medieval churches it was taken as a sign that the minister

would die within a year. That's why we don't have any altar candles here at Har Shalom! Another custom was that if you went outside on the night of Hoshana Rabbah, the last day of Sukkot when tradition tells us the Book of Life is sealed once and for all for the coming year, and you examine your shadow in the moonlight—if your shadow is lacking a head, you could take it as a sign that your death would come in the new year.

So while Jewish law forbade all this magic and superstition, real people found it hard to resist the temptation of trying to penetrate these mysteries of life and death. Recently, while driving south on Falls Road toward Potomac Village, I have noticed a house that seems very out of place in this leafy, upscale area where 81% of the smarty pants population has a college degree or more. A new purple banner recently appeared strung across the porch advertising psychic readings, palms, tarot cards, you name it. Other businesses are closing or downsizing, but the local psychic is booming! Chloe Benjamin, the author of *The Immortalists*, said in an interview, “It is an unbelievable, absurd paradox that we have to put one step in front of another every day without knowing which one will be our last.”

There is a grim sense that lethal danger is literally in the air right now...clinging to exhaled breath and aerosols floating invisibly around us, forcing all of us to think about our mortality more than most would prefer to. Add to that the loneliness factor...people passing without their loved ones at their bedside. I haven't been to a hospital in months, as clergy are forbidden from visiting congregants during this pandemic. I have not been able to recite the deathbed *Vidui* prayer, or provide comfort to the dying. I have officiated at funerals attended by two people, ten people, 15 people is a big funeral these days because we can't gather in significant numbers, even outdoors at the graveside. I have witnessed people set up lap tops next to open graves so loved ones could attend funerals on Zoom, and mourners bringing their own shovels from home in order to perform that powerful, final mitzvah of covering the grave. Shiva minyanim are convened virtually, and while people can “attend” from far and wide, the intimacy of entering a mourner's home, of providing a plate of food, a comforting hug, just the gift of quiet presence are all but impossible at this time. These are the rituals that make death more bearable for us: That we will not be alone when it happens; that we will be mourned and memorialized in a public way; that our survivors will be surrounded and cared for by community.

So, would you want to know the precise date of your death? I've been thinking about that question since finishing *The Immortalists*...and I've decided that I would not want to know. I didn't light a candle between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and I don't plan to examine my shadow at the end of Sukkot. You certainly will not find me hanging out at the Potomac Psychic's house! Rather I will be pondering an exchange found in Talmud, in Tractate Shabbat 153a. In the midst of a discussion about issues of life and death the students of Rabbi Eliezer ask their holy teacher: *Ve'chi adam yodei'a aizehu yom yamut?* Can a person know what day they will die? Rabbi Eliezer answered in this way: *Ve'chol she'kein*, which I am translating as “even more important than that,” *yashuv ha'yom shema yamut le'machar*, “one should repent today, just in case they die tomorrow.” *Ve'nimtza kol yamav bit'shuva*. “And therefore one will spend each day of their life doing *t'shuva*.” I imagine that Rabbi Eliezer's young disciples were initially frustrated by that response. ‘You didn't really answer the question Rabbi!’ ‘We want to know, like the characters in *The Immortalists*, is it possible to know the exact date of our death?’ But then upon further reflection they understood the profound advice of this great Sage. Whether we can or not is really not the most important question. Much more significant is, if it should happen that I die right now, or tomorrow, would I leave this world with unresolved

conflicts, with open wounds, with words that were left unsaid, with relationships in a state of disrepair? Or would I depart this world having paid constant attention to those issues, having expressed my feelings, my love, my dreams to those who needed to hear it; having worked hard to fix what was broken in my life; having pushed myself each day to be better, to be kinder, to be more concerned with others than I am with myself. If you live like that, Rabbi Eliezer said to his students, then the precise date of your death is really not so important at all. The brilliant theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams recently wrote: "...It is true that for me death is not the worst thing that can happen; this is partly because I recognize that things and people I love, value and depend on are not destroyed by my death. If I have been in the habit of acknowledging what is loveable and worthwhile in my life, death can seem less of a total catastrophe."

When the oldest sibling sits across from the fortune teller in *The Immortalists*, she is the only one of the four to question the old woman's prediction. In response to her skepticism, the old woman says, "You wanna know your future? Look in the mirror." How true that is! Your future is not determined by crystal balls or zodiac signs; the lines on your palm or averting the evil eye. Your future, and how you live your life is determined by you. As we remember our loved ones in a few moments in our Yizkor prayers and how they lived their lives, filled their days, loved their families, pursued their dreams and values, may we be inspired by their life stories and our precious memories of them. And let's all take a good hard look in the mirror as this new year begins, and ask ourselves that essential question. "What do you want your future to look like?" And then don't waste any time starting to live your answer!