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I'll begin with a Jewish folktale from Afghanistan:

There was once a Jew who went out into the world to seek justice. Somewhere, he was certain, true justice must exist, but he had never found it. So he set out on a quest that lasted for many years. He went from town to town and village to village, and everywhere he went, he searched for justice, but never did he find it.

In this way many years passed, until the man had explored all of the known world except for one last, great forest...The man went deeper and deeper into [the] forest, until at last he arrived at a little clay hut. Through the window he saw many flickering flames...He went to the door and knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Nothing. At last he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

...[The cottage] was filled with hundreds of shelves, and on every shelf there were dozens of oil candles...[S]ome of the holders were filled with oil and the flames burned brightly, while others had very little oil left.

All at once an old man, with a long, white beard, wearing a white robe, appeared before him. "Shalom aleikhem, my son" the old man said. "How can I help you?" The man replied, "Aleikhem shalom. I have gone everywhere searching for justice, but never have I seen anything like this. Tell me, what are all these candles?"

The old man said, "Each of these candles is the candle of a person's soul. As long as the candle continues to burn that person remains alive. But when the candle burns out that person's soul takes leave of this world."

The man asked, "Can you show me the candle of my soul?"

"Follow me," the old man said...At last they reached a low shelf, and there the old man pointed to a candle...and said, "That is the candle of your soul."

Now the man took one look at that flickering candle, and a great fear fell upon him, for the wick of that candle was very short, and there was very little oil left, and it looked as if at any moment the wick would slide into the oil and sputter out. He began to tremble. Could the end be so near without his knowing it? Then he noticed the candle next to his own...but that one was full of oil, and its wick was long and straight and its flame burned brightly. "And whose candle is that?" the man asked.

“I can only reveal each man’s candle to himself alone,” the old man said, and he turned and left. The man stood there, quaking. All at once he heard a sputtering sound, and when he looked up, he saw smoke rising from another shelf, and he knew that somewhere, someone was no longer among the living. He looked back at his own candle and saw that there were only a few drops of oil left. Then he looked again at the candle next to his own, so full of oil, and a terrible thought entered his mind.

He stepped back and searched for the old man in every corner of the cottage, but he didn’t see him anywhere. Then he picked up the candle next to his own and lifted it up above his own. At that instant the old man appeared out of nowhere and gripped his arm with a grip like iron. And the old man said: “Is this the kind of justice you are seeking?”

The man closed his eyes because it hurt so much. And when he opened his eyes, he saw that the old man was gone, and the cottage and the candles had all disappeared. And he found himself standing alone in the forest and he heard the trees whispering his fate.

And he wondered, had his candle burned out? Was he, too, no longer among the living?

(“Cottage of Candles,” abridged, retold by Howard Schwartz in *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*)

Here is a man who spends his entire life seeking justice only to be confronted with the ultimate test – does he, himself, practice justice in his own life, does he behave with fairness and integrity, does he do what’s right? When he attempts to lengthen his life knowing that it would cut short the life of some unknown other person, his hypocrisy jars us – he searches for justice in every corner of the world but never within himself.

The distinguished Jewish storyteller, Howard Schwartz, brought this folktale back from Israel, and he suggests that the old man with the long, white beard could be the Angel of Death who has come to take the man’s life. That led me to a perhaps more sympathetic reading of this story. Here’s a man who is so afraid of his own death that he is willing to violate his deepest ideals to evade it. He’s willing to put his quest for justice aside because he is so blinded by his own fear. If he quickly pours the oil from another candle into his own, he reasons, he can fool the Angel of Death and live on for many more years.

Given the opportunity, I suspect most of us would attempt to fool the Angel of Death. I think that most of us are afraid of some aspect of death. We might fear the process of dying. We imagine that it is painful or we are unsettled by not knowing what exactly will happen. We might fear how our loved ones who are left behind will fare without us. We might fear the randomness of death; we don’t know when it will happen, and we still have goals to achieve or relationships to mend. Or more existentially, we might fear no longer being on this earth, not having left an impression on this world, and not having fulfilled our dreams.

We know so little about dying, and we can only imagine how our deaths will affect our loved ones. We cannot know when death will take us and whether, at the end of our life, we will feel satisfied by the life we have led and the legacy we will leave. We fear what we do not know, and for all of our modern attempts to gain greater and greater knowledge, death is ultimately unknowable.

Fear is an uncomfortable feeling, so we may try to distract ourselves from it. We run from our fears or deny them or try to act courageously, as if that will make the fear disappear. We rarely confront our fear or see it as something worthwhile, as an important part of our human condition.

The Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön, teaches that fear is an opportunity to move closer to our truths. I take this to mean that fear presents us with an opportunity to wake up to what is truly important, to how we treat others and to how we treat ourselves. How we live with integrity and how we live a holy life.

Chödrön encourages us to embrace our fear. She writes that one of her teachers taught that being intimate with fear can cause our dramas to collapse and the world around us to finally get through (*When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, pp. 2-4).

When we are present to our fear we can understand it for what it is. We can learn from it. In embracing fear we can revisit and even undo thoughts and beliefs that have become so habitual that we don't see other possibilities and we don't live with full intention. Our personal dramas tend to thrust us through each day and we get so absorbed in their details and intricacies that they blind us to the world around us, to our truths, to our deep knowledge of what it means to be a decent, humble, compassionate human being.

When we are present to our fear of death we can confront our fragility and live more purposefully. Many of us are so uncomfortable with death, though, that we either ignore it or we push it away. Like the man in the story, we try to evade the Angel of Death, perhaps not because we want to live forever or even lengthen our years, but because we prefer to talk or think about anything but death. As the author and psychoanalysis researcher, Judith Viorst, writes, "Our denial of death makes it easier to walk through our days and our nights unmindful of the abyss beneath our feet. But denial of death will also...impoverish our lives." (*Necessary Losses: The Loves, Illusions, Dependencies, and Impossible Expectations That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Grow*, p. 306).

Jewish tradition also holds that denying death will impoverish our lives, so it helps us to move closer to our fears through ritual, liturgy, and practice. We end our services with Kaddish, a prayer to remember our dead. We gather four times a year for Yizkor, a service of remembrance, to mourn our loved ones. And once a year we gather on Yom Kippur to embrace our mortality.

Yom Kippur is likened to a day of death, an annual experiment in embracing our mortality. We detach ourselves from our physical bodies so that we can focus on our spiritual lives. We fast, going without food or water, as if we are in the final stages of dying. We wear a kittel, a white burial shroud, or we dress in simple white clothing. We abstain from earthly pleasures, from washing, anointing ourselves, having sex, and wearing leather.

We chant the haunting Unetaneh Tokef prayer: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: how many shall pass on, and how many shall thrive; who will live, and who will die, whose death is timely, and whose is not...” This prayer reminds us that we do not fully control our fate, and it forces us to confront the reality that some of us will die in the next year. And some of us will face the difficult challenge of going on living after our loved ones have died. Perhaps most terrifying is that we do not know which group we will be in.

There is an urgency to Yom Kippur. In confronting our death and the deaths of those around us we come up against frightening truths. This is the time to sit with the fear that arises. We look down into our souls, into those dark places, and it is there that we see the opportunity to change how we are living.

We are all dying, and there is no time to deny our fears, to deny that we will die and that our loved ones will die. There is no time to postpone a difficult phone call to our estranged sister. There is no time to evade responsibility for wronging our brother. There is no time to put off telling our children that we love them, to put off mending a bruised relationship with our spouse, or to put off reconciliation with our parent. There is no time to procrastinate reaching out to our friends, colleagues, and members of our community.

Rabbi Eliezer taught, “Repent one day before your death.” His students responded, “How can anyone know which day is one day prior to their death?” He responded, “Repent today, because tomorrow you may die.” (Shabbat 153a)

If tomorrow we may die, what is it that we need to do?

Or, more eloquently, in the words of the poet, Mary Oliver:

Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?  
(from “The Summer Day,” *New and Selected Poems*, 1992)

What do we plan to do with our one wild and precious life?

This is the ultimate question of Yom Kippur. We will die. We do not know whose candle is the next to flicker and sputter out. We cannot evade the Angel of Death. We can shape our lives and even perhaps influence our deaths, but we cannot control the future and we cannot make

time stand still. As Viorst writes, ...[W]e...have to live with a sense of transience, aware that no matter how passionately we love whatever we love, we don't have the power to make either it, or us, stay (*Necessary Losses*, p. 323).

We encounter so much loss as we live, but we must go on living, really living. Not moving through the motions of living, but embracing life, letting in the world around us, seeing within ourselves the deep knowledge of what it means to be a decent, humble, compassionate human being.

On this Yom Kippur, let us sit with our deepest fears, not pushing them away but accepting them and learning from them. Let us allow our fears to lead us to new places, new relationships, new perspectives, and new ways of living. Let us confront our own mortality and the mortality of our loved ones, accepting a sense of transience. Let us use this time to reflect on how we want to live and what we want to do with our one wild and precious life.

*Gemar Chatimah Tovah.* May we all be sealed for good.