

Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon 5779
September 19th, 2018
B'nai Israel Congregation
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Facing our Own (Im)mortality

Last summer I received a text message from a friend from high school, one who I had not spoken to for a couple of years. We did not have a falling out. We just lost touch over time, as our lives drifted in different directions. She asked if I had a minute to talk. I could never have anticipated what she would tell me when I called: Our friend, Sagar Shah, had died of lung cancer the day before. By the time he had been diagnosed, it was already too late. Sagar's battle with lung cancer lasted less than a month. Sagar was 28 years old when he died. In high school, we were part of an inseparable group of friends. We had our fun, but we were also intensely dedicated to our academic pursuits, and we supported one another in reaching those goals. We studied together for the SATs and ACTs; we competed for who would get that perfect score on the Math SAT II. Sagar did. He was a great friend to us all. He called on our birthdays, and our half-birthdays. His life was cut short, a tragic end. Sagar was my first friend to die, and although we spoke only once or twice a year for these past few years, his death has weighed upon me. I learned that day to face my own mortality. And today, on Yom Kippur, I ask the following: Is it not time that we all faced our own mortality? Today, I wish to address the inconvenient truth that all of us will eventually die.

Death is no stranger on Yom Kippur. Perhaps the most ubiquitous image of the High Holidays is that of the Book of Life and the Book of Death, laying open before God, with the Divine quill prepared with ink to inscribe our names in one of them, but we do not know which one. The *piyyut*, *Unataneh Tokef*, asks the question plainly: "מי יחיה ומי ימות?" Who shall live and

who shall die?" In a few moments, we will recite Yizkor, remembering those who have departed from this world. Today is, arguably, about accepting our own mortality.

Rabbi Alan Lew describes Yom Kippur this way, "For the next twenty-four hours you rehearse your own death. You wear a shroud and, like a dead person, you neither eat nor drink nor fornicate. You summon the desperate strength of life's last moments. A great wall of speech is hurled against your heart again and again; a fist beats against the wall of your heart relentlessly until you are brokenhearted and confess to your great crime. You are a human being, guilty of every crime imaginable."¹ Rabbi Lew teaches us that Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for death. It is a day when we desist from engaging in the most human of activities: eating, drinking, and the other physical pleasures of life. It is a day when we are compelled to accept that life is finite; that we are mortal beings. And then we step forward and ask ourselves: How will I make the lifetime that lays ahead the best possible life? The reality of our mortality should motivate and inspire us to live life to the fullest. I pray that it is not a depressing, somber, or crippling reality to accept.

In Judaism, our existence is not limited to this world. Reflecting on the words of the *machzor*, one rabbi writes that in Judaism, "Life is conceived as a continuous process of eternal evolution, and what we call life in this world is but a stage in that development."² Our existence here is temporary, but it is not the end. Our presence in this world is part of a process that continues even after we die.

¹ Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, p. 4-5.

² Rabbi A. L. Rubinstein, *Companion to the Machzor*, p. 101.

In the well-known Mishnaic tractate, Pirkei Avot, the Wisdom of our Sages, Rabbi Yaakov teaches us, “This world is like a corridor, or a hallway (פרוודור), leading to the world-to-come. Prepare yourself in the corridor, so as [to be ready] to enter the great reception hall.”³ In other words, our life in the earthly realm is only the beginning. It is like standing in the entryway of our homes, removing our shoes, hanging up our coats—mere preparations before walking into the main part of the house. And that main part, that great reception hall, is the World to Come, *Olam Haba*, the afterlife. It is where the eternal soul dwells after departing from the earthly body.

But if life here is merely about preparations, does that not diminish this life and devalue this world? If this world is like the coming attractions before the feature film, what’s the rush, why show up at all? Countering that idea, I would suggest that this life, in this world, is a critical component of the process of our eternal spiritual evolution. Rabbi Gordon Tucker, in his commentary on this mishnah, suggests that Rabbi Yaakov is “reminding us that it is only in this world that we can earn our way to the world-to-come.”⁴ Passage from the entryway to the great hall is not guaranteed. In other words, only those with prior reservations are lead from the entryway to a table for the majestic banquet of the World to Come. How does one make these reservations, you ask? By *preparing* in this world, toiling and tarrying in the earthly realm to demonstrate to each other and to God that we are worthy of a seat at that great banquet to come. In this world, we honor our parents, keep Shabbat, treat the stranger kindly, offer righteous generosity. These are but a few ways that we solidify our seat at the table. Life in this

³ Pirkei Avot 4:21, *Lev Shalem*, p. 209.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 4:21, *Lev Shalem*, Commentary of Gordon Tucker, p. 209.

world is of the utmost importance, because through it we are the designers of our destiny. God's hand and quill are guided by the choices we make, and by the words we speak. Remember that time is of the essence. None of us is immortal. This is the reality we must accept, and doing so will compel us to take seriously our preparations, to make the most of our time in this entryway of life.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught a parable about the importance of preparing for our departure from the land of the living: A king invited his servants to a feast, but he did not include a date or time on the invitations. Those who were wise hurried home to prepare, donning their finest clothing and waiting anxiously at the entrance to the palace. "Is anything missing or incomplete?" they pondered, hoping to have the chance to be of the greatest assistance to their Sovereign. But the foolish ones went about their ordinary labors and tasks. If the feast was not yet scheduled, why worry about the preparations?

Eventually, and without any warning, the invitations arrived. The feast would begin today, at sundown, in just a few hours. The wise ones entered the palace fully prepared to see the King. The foolish had no time to bathe, no time to even change their clothes, and rushed into the palace moments before the gate clanged shut, filthy, harried, and unprepared.

When all were assembled, the King stepped forward and declared: These wise servants who prepared for the feast shall sit and eat and drink, but these fools who did not shall stand and watch. Which are you? One who has prepared and is ready to enjoy the feast, or one who can only merit to stand by and watch the enjoyment and pleasure of others. Be amongst those who prepare. Do not rush to the banquet, but live your life knowing full well that one day, you too will receive your invitation, and it may come at any time.

Perhaps the greatest reminder of human frailty and our own mortality is the recitation of the Yizkor prayers, when we acknowledge that our loved ones no longer exist in this earthly, physical realm, and pray that their souls are bound up in the bonds of eternal life of the World to Come. It is a heart-wrenching moment, difficult to comprehend. But Judaism offers us all a comforting notion: While the physical body is finite; the soul is eternal. Beyond this world is yet another where the souls of the righteous dine together, seated in glory and majesty at an unimaginably exquisite banquet. Each one earned their place at the table by demonstrating to others and to God their profound commitment to morality, justice, and righteousness. During Yizkor, we remember them, and we pray that we learn from the examples they set, and thereby earn ourselves a seat at the table next to them.

We all learn from the positive example of our departed loved ones. Our parents, our grandparents, our spouses, our siblings, our children, our friends—all have the power to serve as our teachers of the journey, both when they stand next to us in this world and when they are seated at the banquet in the World to Come, departed from here physically, but spiritually and emotionally ever-present. We honor the deceased by living up to the example they set for us. We acknowledge that they are physically gone and spiritually present; distant and nearby. We hold in our hearts and minds two seemingly conflicting ideas: Our time on this earth is temporary, and our soul lives on. This world is one stop on the journey.

In the Talmud (Shabbat 153a), Rabbi Eliezer teaches his students that they should repent one day before their death. His students protest, “We don’t know when we will die.” Rabbi Eliezer quips back, *ישׁוב היום, שמא ימות למחר*, “Then you should repent today, lest you die tomorrow.” In other words, *live each day as if it is your last*. From a Jewish perspective, living

each day as if it is your last is not about taking risks, having immeasurable fun, or doing anything extreme. It is about the preparations that take place in the corridor. It is taking the long-term view, and getting ready for what comes next. If Judaism teaches us that we should repent before our deaths, and if we never know when exactly we will die, then each day should be lived as if it was our last chance to do good in the world, as if it was our last chance to right our wrongs and fix the errors of our ways. Today might be our last chance to honor our loved ones who have departed from this world, and today could be the last time we can prepare ourselves to sit next to them in the banquet hall.