

Dying with Dignity  
Yom Kippur 5783  
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In a world of memes, for those with short attention spans, self-help books for those who want a deeper dive, self-help gurus, classes, coaches, etc., there is no shortage of directives and advice about how to live one's life. One of my favorites is a quote from Mae West:

"You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough."

Searching for how to have a meaningful life is part of human nature.

And, religion has been teaching us about how to live a life of meaning as long as we have been searching for the meaning of life.

The Jewish calendar has a built in metric by which we can regularly check in and gauge if we are living a life of purpose. While there are touch points throughout the year, the most obvious is today, Yom Kippur.

As we stand here, today, on the most religiously significant day of the year, we reflect on what it means to have spent another year on this planet, on the relationships we have nurtured, those we have lost, on our deeds of kindness and love, and on the places where we have fallen short of our own expectations for ourselves. Today is not about our achievements in business, how much money we made, about our athletic prowess, or how we look, the things that society places the highest value on. No, today is about who we are when we are at home, sitting at the table, across from those we love. It is about who we are when we are at the grocery store or rushing to carpool for pickup. It is about who we are when we stand before ourselves facing the mirror.

It is a chance to look at ourselves and ask, "Am I being the person I want to be?"

We, as Jews believe that we are accountable for our actions, that we have a responsibility to be a good person and if we don't take responsibility for our actions now, we will be held to account at the end of our days. We will stand before God and be judged. There is no expectation to be perfect, but there is an expectation to try.

In truth, we are to do a mental scan every day and check to see where we stand on the barometer of righteousness. We have all been so indoctrinated to buckle our seatbelt every time we get in the car. How amazing would it be if we could do the same for our righteousness self check? Hmm...today I have been about "here". Ok. Tomorrow I can do better. But this itself is a difficult task to achieve. Not the expectation to be righteous every day, but to even do the self check, the buckle-up. Our tradition recognizes this challenge and therefore gives us a time span, Elul and then Rosh Hashanah, followed by Aseret Yemei T'shuvah, the ten days that lead up to the climatic day to come clean, Yom Kippur for anything we may or may not have done, for any potential missteps. Furthermore, we do this today not just for ourselves, but for our whole community. "We have sinned" says the *Al Chet*. It is not just about my self check any more, we have instituted communal laws, much like our seat belt regulations, as safeguards against the humanness of callousness and carelessness. Buckle up! It is time for your righteousness self scan.

Pirkei Avot (4:22), Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar says:

**...against your will were you formed, against your will were you born, against your will you live, against your will you will die, and against your will you will give an account and reckoning before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God.**

Is this true? Is this all, each step, conception, birth, living, dying and standing to account for our actions against our will? Though there is much to say about each of these, the steps of one's life, I want to focus on just the last section.

**... and against your will you will give an account and reckoning before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God.**

Our religion pushes back on this notion, that it is fully against our will and asserts that you have some agency. Is it not that today, on Yom Kippur, we are trying to mitigate the judgment we face when we do stand before God?

A couple of chapters earlier in Pirkei Avot (2:10) we read that Rabbi Eliezar taught: **"Repent one day before your death."**

But how can one possibly do T'shuvah before the day before their death when they don't know when they will die?

The Talmud (Shabbat 153a) explains that his real meaning was that a person should be in a process of Tshuva (repentance) every day, since one never knows which will be the day they will die.

It is not that we can avoid standing before God, but if we have done a self check annually, or, if we become particularly practiced and can manage a daily buckle-up self check, then we are prepared to face God and take responsibility for our actions, for being engaged in the act of trying to be a better person.

As some of you know, my mother died very suddenly just after I began working here. When I say sudden, for our family, her death really came as a shock. My mother had some health issues but nothing that was seen as terminal, any more than the way that simply living is terminal for all of us. My mother was under medical observation and was admitted to the hospital for some strange bruising and a little bleeding. The next day I was on the phone discussing end of life options. That same day, she was diagnosed with leukemia and within five days, her body had given up the fight against a cancer we never knew she had.

This was not the when or where of her choosing. On Wednesday we had a good conversation, full of optimism and plans. On Tuesday, less than a week later, I was begging for her body to hold out long enough for me to arrive at her side and say goodbye. My mother would have rather had a different ending to her story. She wanted to live longer. She wanted to repair broken relationships, to see her grand and great grandchildren grow up. She had plans. Rabbi Elazar said, **against your will you will die**. For my mother, this was true.

However, my mother imparted one final life lesson. My mother, Rae Marcelle Cox, who had gone by many names, personas, and lived many lives, was ready to die every day. My mother was far from perfect, she made many mistakes, as we all do, but of all the people I have known, my mother was one of the better ones about doing a, if not daily, then a regular check up, her buckle-up procedure to make sure that when the final day came, she was good.

There is something very dignified in approaching life this way, planning for a future, but taking the time every day to make sure that we are being a good person. I know that I often fail at this. I've said something a bit harsher than I would have liked to the people I love the most. I have had less patience, less tolerance, less sympathy than I believe I am capable of. And, as I try to model good behavior for my daughter, I am trying to stay present to the life lesson that is my inheritance from my mother. I will try to do a self-check buckle up every day that I step into the car of life. As I make t'shuvah for the mistakes of this past year and the years prior, I will follow the teaching of Rabbi Eliezar and the example of my mother and **"Repent one day before my death."**