

After The Death ... Let Us Live

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When I was in high school, the Fox network aired a sitcom called "Herman's Head." It's okay if you've never heard of it. The truth is that it wasn't that good, but the concept was cute. The main character, Herman Brooks (played by William Ragsdale) would work through his daily routine as a fact checker for a magazine, and whenever he would be confronted with a life challenge, we would watch as Herman's intellect, his sensitivity, his anxiety, and his libido competed for attention.

I mention that because today I want to tell you about the things in my head (beyond my concerns about Israel, which I dealt with last night, and beyond the hunger we are probably all experiencing by this point).

So here they are – the musings of Mickey's Head:

1. The synagogue is pretty full today. Covid numbers are rising, as will happen, but it is probably time to learn something from our experience with the pandemic.
2. Antisemitism is on the rise. The lead article in the Washington Post's religion section on Rosh Hashanah described how Jewish communities are being vigilant. It cited the Secure Communities Network and included a picture of worshippers in Pittsburgh being greeted by a police officer as they entered for services. We know the experience. We are so grateful to the officers who stand guard here. But it is a shame when security concerns must overshadow our actual celebration of the holidays.
3. The other article in the religion section described what has come to be known as "the great dechurching." "More people have left the church in the last 25 years," a recent book proclaims, "then all the new people who became Christians from the first great awakening, second great awakening, and Billy Graham crusades combined." That book is about the Christian community, but I flagged it because we also know how to worry about the future of congregations.
4. In these moments before Yizkor, I am thinking of loved ones who have passed away, and of families who have been bereaved. We've lost seasoned leaders. We've seen people cut down long before their time. I am also thinking of Rabbi Matthew Simon, who passed away just a few days before Rosh Hashanah.

I'm thinking about these things, and I'm looking for a message. How do we respond to the challenges of the moment? How do we maintain faith in the face of seemingly senseless loss? My short answer is that we must look forward. Our first question is not: *why do these things happen?* But rather: *What can I do to create a better future?*

Our Torah reading today described the rituals performed by the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. But it began in an odd place: "Adonai spoke to Moses *acharei mot*, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord." It refers to when

Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were struck down on the day the tabernacle was to be dedicated. The Torah says they offered *esh zarah*, a strange fire, and centuries of commentary have tried to ascertain what that means. The question today, though, is why the death of Aaron's sons is mentioned as our introduction to the commandment about the Yom Kippur ritual. Those deaths take place seven chapters earlier than today's reading; so why is the Torah bringing them up again now?

One possibility is that the Yom Kippur ritual is supposed to teach a lesson about the death of Aaron's sons. Midrash Leviticus Rabbah cites a verse from Ecclesiastes: "The same fate is shared by the righteous and the wicked," and comments: *who is the righteous? This is Aaron who witnessed the death of his sons. And who is the wicked? This is the congregation of Korah, who were swallowed up by the earth after rebelling against God's authority.* Korah and his band were wicked, while Aaron and his sons were righteous; but they all shared the same fate. In other words, we don't know why Aaron's sons died. Not all tragedy can be explained.

Akiva Mattenson, a member of the Advanced Kollel at the Hadar Institute, draws on this midrash to interpret a central feature of the Yom Kippur ritual. Aaron is commanded to take two goats, which are to experience very different fates. One goat is to be honored. It will be slaughtered, its blood sprinkled in the sanctuary, and then offered on the altar. (I know that doesn't seem like an honor today, but in the ancient context, it had to be an honor to be the animal whose blood would purify God's holy shrine!) The other goat is to be dishonored. This goat, the scapegoat is to be led out into the wilderness and marched off a cliff.

And how is it decided which animal is honored on the altar and which thrown off a cliff? Aaron is to cast lots. It is done by chance. Mattenson says this is the point. Just as the fate of these poor animals is left to chance, so is the fate of every human being. That message cuts against the theology of Unetaneh Tokef, which imagines that God determines the fate of all creatures on Yom Kippur, but it is one of the beauties of our tradition that it can hold multiple theological truths at the same time. It may be that there is no reason – other than chance – that Aaron experienced tragedy. And I suspect that many in this room can relate. Not all tragedy can be explained. Not all death can be assigned to God's will.

But the narrative doesn't end with death. Our Torah reading *begins* after the death of Aaron's sons and moves directly to the commandment that Aaron serve on Yom Kippur. Mattenson imagines God, as it were, approaching Aaron with an offer. I understand your grief, God says, so I want to give you an opportunity to honor your sons' memory by serving your people in a profound way. Through your service, the sanctuary and the community will be purified every year. And this becomes the second message of Acharei Mot. Our best response "after the death" is to find a way to serve a higher purpose.

It is telling that the long form of the Torah portion concludes with a rejoinder: "Observe My statutes and laws," God says, "which I give in order that you will live, *vachai bahem.*" Service is a means to experience life. Service is the response to senseless death. For Aaron, it was service in the sanctuary. For us, it is service through *mitzvot*.

And I am thinking of one particular *mitzvah*, what our tradition calls *chesed shel emet*, an act of true kindness, which is service to our dead. In the Jewish tradition, preparation of the dead for burial

should not be left to professional undertakers. Throughout history, one of the first institutions emerging Jewish communities created was the *chevra kadisha*, the sacred society tasked with caring for the dead. We are blessed to be served by a community *chevra kadisha*, but our congregational group is pretty small. We have a women's group, but our synagogue doesn't have a men's *chevra kadisha*. And I want to change that. Our women's group could use more people, too. So, if you are interested in learning about this sacred work, I urge you to be in touch. After death, *acharei mot*, let us bring honor and dignity to the deceased.

Of course, there are other ways to serve, too. Our bereavement committee also educates members about the rituals, traditions and logistics of death; and supports members during *shiva*. Our social action committee, Mitzvah Day, the Refugee and Immigrant Aid Committee, Israel Affairs, SEA Change – each of these groups serves B'nai Israel and the larger community. And I don't have to list the myriad other things one might do to serve others.

Last year, I told a story of a man who dreamed he came into a house filled with burning lights, representing all the living souls in the world. When he saw that his own flame was flickering, the man quickly grabbed another lamp so he could siphon off some of its oil. But a hand stopped him. "That's not how it works here," he was told. "In this place, our flames are made to burn brighter when we give oil to others, not when we take from them." The man poured oil from his lamp into a few others, and when he put it down, he saw that his flame was indeed burning brighter. We are strengthened through service.

It strikes me that this is our best response to antisemitism as well. The numbers are alarming, and it's not okay. It isn't funny when a teenager draws a swastika on a desk at school. No person should be harassed because of their choice to wear a *yarmulke* or a Jewish star necklace. It is wrong to suggest that there is one country in the world whose policy missteps are so egregious as to deny it legitimacy among the family of nations, and it "just happens" to be the world's *only* Jewish state. There is a reason why our synagogue expends significant funds to hire officers and guards.

But that isn't enough. We won't defeat antisemitism just by spending money and hardening our building. We must also respond positively, by renewing our commitment to Jewish living. If we aren't doing Jewish. ... If we aren't learning Jewish. ... If we aren't eating Jewish, or praying Jewish, or celebrating Jewish, or associating Jewishly, than just what are we protecting? *Acharei mot*, after the death, after the threats comes living, *vachai bahem*.

That is the legacy of Rabbi Matthew Simon. Since 1973 at B'nai Israel, and really since he was ordained in 1958, Rabbi Simon was a champion of Jewish living. He was raised in a rabbinic family and always valued celebrating Shabbat and festivals with multiple generations. He was a champion of Jewish education at the old Consolidated Hebrew School, and contributed *tzedakah* to ensure individuals with intellectual, emotional, and physical disabilities – in America and in Israel – could learn Hebrew, celebrate b'nai *mitzvah*, and attend summer camp. At B'nai Israel, the Rabbi Matthew H. and Dr. Sara Rubinow Simon Legacy Endowment for Jewish Engagement supports those values.

Rabbi Simon lived a life of service. He was a naval chaplain in Japan and remained active for 28 years. Even after retirement, he visited patients at Walter Reed. While still serving B'nai Israel, Rabbi Simon found time to serve other organizations. I remember the first time I met him and he explained it to me. (I'm not sure I can do his voice!) "Every rabbi needs a hobby," he said. "And my hobby is serving the Jewish community." He was president of our Jewish Federation, and also served the Joint Retirement Board, Camp Ramah, Masorti, Mercaz, and all the institutions of the Conservative movement.

In tribute to Rabbi Simon, we can pledge to live Jewish lives, *vachai bahem*, and to do more to support our synagogue. I would give that advice to folks worrying about the "dechurching of America" as well. Sometimes, organizations fall into a trap whereby they think the only way to garner support is by doing things for others. That's fine when people need something. But if we want to be successful, we also need to ask people who *don't* need anything to get involved and help. That's what the best megachurches do when they sign people up for various "ministries" after Sunday services. That's what God offered Aaron with the Yom Kippur ritual. And it is what I am doing now in asking you to join our *chevra kadisha* or any other committee that might strengthen our community. Make a commitment in tribute to all the loved ones we remember today.

It just makes sense. In his book *How God Works*, the psychologist David DeSteno describes the Hindu concept of vanaprastha. This is the third of four ashramas, or life stages, described by Hindu scripture. It begins around age 50, after a person has devoted about 25 years to building a family and earning a livelihood. During vanaprastha, a person aspires to turn away from personal ambitions, and to focus on wisdom, spirituality, and service. Psychologically, vanaprastha comes right at the time data suggests a person's happiness hits its low point. The mid-life crisis is real, and the antidote is service.

DeSteno cites a study of the Jewish community to suggest that as we age, pursuit of personal pleasure becomes less meaningful. When asked about Judaism's most important holiday, 37% of 18- to 39-year-olds pointed to Yom Kippur, while 20% said Hanukkah. For Jews above 60, however, 53% said Yom Kippur was the most important holiday, while only 6% pointed to Hanukkah. Yom Kippur, with its theme of negating the self, is cited as most important by everyone, but a relatively high number of young people still focus on the gifts and pleasures of Hanukkah. That changes as we age.

But it isn't only age that brings about the change. DeSteno shows that in 2003, during the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong, when young people felt vulnerable, their values began to move in the direction of the older group. Researchers found that their focus on personal advancement was replaced by a desire to form deeper social connections and improve the social order.

I pray that this might be the lasting result of our experience with Covid, too. Perhaps we might resolve that our relentless pursuit of personal wealth and advancement is not all-important. When the pandemic began, we turned inward to protect ourselves. We learned how to connect in the virtual space, and it was amazing ... but also limiting. We discovered that we missed being together. We needed to be with other people, to support them and celebrate with them and love them. In the post-Covid world, we need to live ... and not just for ourselves. We need to live as Aaron lived. We must live to serve.

In a moment, we are going to recite Yizkor. The *Shulkhan Arukh*, the most important of our medieval law codes, suggests that we pledge *tzedakah* and recite the memorial prayers because the dead also receive atonement on Yom Kippur. A commentary on the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the *Mishnah Berurah* says this is why the Torah calls this holiday Yom HaKippurim. In the Torah, the word is plural, it isn't just Yom Kippur. Because when we pledge on their behalf, it is as if they are pledging too. If a child honors a parent, the parent earns merit alongside the child. On Yom Kippur, we pledge .. for them.

This was God's response to Aaron in his bereavement. It is our answer to the communal challenges of the future. It is the best way to honor the ones we have loved and lost. And it is literally good for our health. *Acharei mot ... vaChai bahem*, After death, let us *live ...* through *mitzvot*.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah. May we be inscribed for good in the Book of Everlasting Life. Amen.