

## Overcoming the Fear of Dying

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*Do not be afraid of unexplained terror, or the disasters that come upon the wicked (Proverbs 3:25).*

If we were to make a list of our most basic fears, death almost certainly would be at the top. I've experienced it at the bedside in the hospital – fear of what comes next, “what is happening to me? Am I going to die?” There is the unqualified joy of having emerged from a bout with death, being given a second chance, a new lease on life. The sadness and grief at the passing of a loved one; and the anger when it comes too soon or unexpectedly, or if there is a feeling that, somehow, death could have been avoided.

I want to dedicate my remarks this morning to my teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, who died this past year at the age of 84. For at least the last 25 years of his life, death was a preoccupation. On the dedication page to his book *The Death of Death*, Rabbi Gillman inscribed the concluding passage from Had Gadya, the prayer that ends the Passover Seder: “Then came the Blessed Holy One and slaughtered the Angel of Death.” That, for Gillman, is the essence of the Messianic Age. We pray for a time when God will have the power to overcome death. But until then, we live with the fear. In his words: “All living things eventually die, but only human beings live with the awareness of their death. This is the terrifying paradox at the heart of human existence: We are animals who are yet conscious of our animal nature.” Our ability to understand and comprehend is the root of our most basic fear.

It's the classic story of the three men who died in a plane crash and found themselves at an orientation to enter heaven. Each one is asked, “When you are in your casket, what would you like to hear your friends and family saying about you.” The first says, “I want them to say I was a skilled professional and a supporter of my community.” The next says, “I'd like people to say I was a great husband and father.” And then the third responds, “At my funeral, I'd like to hear them say, ‘Look, he's moving.’”

Or as a movie character put it, “I am not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

It is not just the Yizkor service. Death is one of the defining themes of Yom Kippur. We wear white, in part so we can be like the ministering angels. But the Rabbis explain that another reason for wearing white is that Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death. White is the color of shrouds. We don't eat or drink because such bodily functions are not necessary for the dead.

Many of our prayers today highlight the fragility of life. *Unetaneh Tokef* imagines God judging who will live and who will die. The Avodah service recalls the meticulous preparations of the High Priest before entering the Holy of Holies, where; any misstep could result in death. Martyrology recounts the ancient Rabbis and others who died for the sanctification of God's name. So much focus on death. It's more than a little disconcerting; it inspires fear. But we do this every year because it is in our contemplation of the reality of death that we resolve again how best to live. We cannot hope to explain why different people encounter death in different ways. We can hope only to make the best of the years we are given.

One of the most dramatic scenes of Torah involves Moses coming to grips with his impending death, a saga that is always read during this season. It isn't fair. We all "know" why Moses is condemned to die – he hit the rock when God said to speak to it. Except that explanation doesn't make sense. What is so terribly sinful about hitting a rock? In a similar scene in Exodus, the first time the Israelites complained about not having enough water, God had told Moses to hit a rock to produce water. And it worked. So what's the great sin here? God told Moses to take his staff and speak to the rock. It doesn't seem fair that he should be condemned to die without entering the Land of Israel.

The commentators conjure up all kinds of other explanations: Moses said that *he* would produce water from the rock, implying that it was him and not God performing the miracle. Moses lost his temper; he shouted at the people and called them rebels. In anger, he hit the rock twice when once would have been sufficient. At one point Moses suggests that he did nothing wrong: "*VAdonai hit-anaf bi biglalkhem*, God got angry with me because of what *you* – the people – did when you lost faith." The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian scholar Samuel David Luzzato throws up his hands and determines that the reason is not in the text. There simply is no reason. It's a mystery.

Perhaps the best explanation can be found in the interaction of Moses pleading his case. In the Torah's words: "*Va-etchanan el Adonai*, I pleaded with the Lord," Moses says. "Let me please cross over and enter the land." And God lashes out in anger, "*Rav Lakh*," God says. "Enough. *al tosef daber eilai od bavadavar ha-zeh*, Never speak to Me about this matter again."

Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for Moses's plea, *Va-etchanan*, is unusual. We would expect "*va-etpallel*, I prayed;" or "*va-adabber*, I spoke." What is the meaning of "*va-etchanan*?" The root *chanun* means grace, which Rashi says harkens back to another episode many years earlier.

After the Golden Calf, God tells Moses it is time to resume the journey to bring the people to the Promised Land. But Moses is scared. "You tell me to move the people forward," Moses says, "but you have not made known to me who You will send with me." Moses is scared to lead the people by himself. He demands that God reveal Himself. God tells Moses that it is not possible to reveal the Divine Countenance, but promises: "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Adonai, *va-chanoti et asher achon u'richamti et asher a-rachem*, and I will be gracious as I am gracious, and I will be compassionate as I am compassionate."

The language is vague: "I will be gracious as I am gracious." I'm not sure Moses understood it at the time. But years later, when he appeals to God's grace the same word, *va-etchanan*, God's angry

response becomes an explanation for those enigmatic words. God was essentially saying, “I will be as gracious as I can be; I will be as compassionate as I can be.” It amounts to an admission that there are limits to God's power. Do not speak of this again because I have done all that I can do. Moses did not die because he hit the rock. He died because it was time to die. Moses died because all people die, and even God is not powerful enough to change that.

Moses appears to have gotten the message. From that point on, he does not lash out in anger. He uses his final speech to remind the people of the covenant, their values and laws. He tells Joshua to be strong and resolute. My teacher Rabbi Allen Kensky compares Moses's development in this regard to Elisabeth Kubler Ross's five stages of grief – Moses moves from **denial** to **anger** to **bargaining** to **depression**, and eventually to **acceptance** of the reality that death is inevitable; and he is no longer fearful.

The Psalmist would describe that acceptance many years later in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: “*Gam ki elekh b'gei tzalmavet lo ira ra ki atah i-madi*, Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” – though I accept that death is inevitably near – “I will fear no evil for You are with me.” Moses discovers that when it comes to death, it is futile to ask “why?” He spends the rest of his life asking “how – how am I going to live? How am I going to make a difference in whatever time is allotted?”

On Yom Kippur, we come face-to-face with that same reality. It's the most familiar prayer of the service, *Unetaneh Tokef*, the medieval *piyyut* with the haunting imagery:

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who will live and who will die? Who will live a long life and who will come to an untimely end? Who will be at peace and who will be troubled?*

The words invoke fear – observe the law, make changes, or else there is no limit to what the all-powerful, awe-inspiring God can do. I can imagine how those words sound to the person undergoing treatment for cancer; or the anger of the one who has experienced a difficult loss. Is that really what we believe – that God is deciding right now what will happen in the year ahead, and that these decisions are based on whether I am successful in the synagogue? That's what the prayer says; and we are left with three interpretive options:

- We can accept it as truth that this is how the world works. Everyone who suffers deserves the suffering; and when we see good people suffer, we assume that God knows the reasons because God is just. That works for some people.
- A second option is to believe that God could control suffering and death but chooses not to – either because God is not always nice or not always just. The Psalmist speaks of God hiding God's Face. We say it in the Psalm for the season: “*Al taster panekha mi-meni*, Do not hide Your face from me.”
- Or the third option, which I have described as the conclusion of Moses. As powerful as God is, even God cannot control death.

Taken literally, the prayer does not speak to our reality, so I choose to read it as an aspiration, a wish. I wish that God could be in complete control, granting life to the righteous and punishing the wicked. I wish, but that is not how the world is. And so I have to ask myself: How? How can I live with the knowledge that, inevitably, I, each of us will at one time or another experience some type of tragedy?

The answer is found in the prayer's conclusion: "*UT'shuvah ut'filah utz'dakkah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zerah*, Death is certain, but repentance, prayer, and acts of charity overcome the severity of the decree." Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a colleague in the San Francisco area, teaches that the answer to overcoming the decree that all people will die is selflessness. Repentance, prayer and charity are all acts that diminish the *self* in service of an Other.

*T'shuvah* literally means returning to God. As the talmudist Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz puts it, *teshuvah* means turning away from what we crave in order to perform God's will or repair relationships with other people. In that sense, *Teshuvah* is an act of generosity.

*Tefillah*, prayer. The Hasidic masters hear in the *shofar* blasts the purest form of prayer. *Tekiah* is a sound of wholeness; but it is followed by sounds of brokenness, *shevarim* and *teruah*, because the purest prayers are generated by the breaking down of the self. Prayers begin with *barukh*, bending the knee. Prayer acknowledges that God is supreme, not me. Prayer is an act of selflessness.

And *tzedakah* is all about giving – money, time, love. We give of ourselves in order to support the needs of others. The diminishing of the self ennobles us, and enables us to cross over or go beyond the reality of the death decree, *ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zerah*.

Rabbi Michael Gold tells a story about a man who had a strange dream. He saw a house that was giving off a great deal of light. When he walked in, he saw all sorts of candles all over the place. Some were burning brightly, some were dim, some were almost flickering out. He found the keeper of the house and asked, "What is this?"

The keeper replied, "Each candle is a different soul living in the world. The ones burning bright are in the prime of life. The ones low on oil and flickering are people who are dying. When the candle goes out, the person dies."

The keeper of the candles turned his back for a moment and the man quickly searched for his own candle. He found a flickering flame in the corner with his name on it; it looked as if it was about to be extinguished. The man panicked and looked around for some more oil to pour in so it would burn brighter. He started to take oil from a brighter candle. But a hand stopped him.

"That's not how it works here," the keeper of the candles chastised. "Your candle does not burn brighter when you take oil from someone else. On the contrary, your candle burns brighter when you give oil to someone else." The man picked up his flickering candle and poured oil into several other bowls. And when he put it down, the flame started burning brighter. And then the man awoke from his very strange dream.

Our candles burn brighter, we overcome our fear of the certainty of death by giving. Giving is the essence of Yizkor. The prayer includes a pledge to give *tzedakah* and perform acts of charity and goodness. It is a way of affirming the values of our dear ones, and also of ensuring that our limited years will be characterized by purpose and meaning. *Tzedaka* can be a financial gift, and giving of ourselves can be so much more.

For some, giving is the service of the heart, dedicating time to attend a Minyan or recite the Kaddish, making the effort to learn a service – maybe even to lead a service – to contribute to the congregation in that way. It could mean making the effort to be more deliberate, more introspective with prayer, to use the words as a springboard for better appreciation and awareness. That’s the service of the heart.

And giving is also done with our hands and feet. It might mean helping to prepare food for a homeless shelter or attending a rally to advocate for refugees or would-be immigrants, or in support of laws and policies that benefit the disadvantaged. Acts of kindness, but not random; kindness with a purpose – to bring value, to make our imperfect world a better place. I add a plug for Mitzvah Day in December, but of course every day can be a Mitzvah Day.

Service of the mind would mean devoting time on a regular basis for study of sacred text, in order that we might grow, and also to preserve our tradition. Study is an act of giving in the sense that we dedicate the time to try to understand something that seems foreign, to try to understand why it was so important to others who dedicated so much time to those texts and interpretations.

When we give of ourselves – our minds, our hearts, our things – this is how we overcome the severity of the decree. As the anonymous poet puts it:

Birth is a beginning and death a destination,  
And life is a journey  
From foolishness to discretion ...  
From offense to forgiveness ...  
From fear to faith.  
From defeat to defeat to defeat –  
Until, looking backward or ahead,  
We see that victory lies not in some place along the way  
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,  
A sacred pilgrimage to life everlasting.

That is what Moses discovered in the moment that his final plea to cross the Jordan was rejected by God. And it is what the great Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Pryzcha meant when he was lying on his deathbed and he saw his wife crying and offered her words of comfort. “Why are you crying?” He asked. “My whole life was lived only that I might learn how to die.”

In this moment before Yizkor, as we remember loved ones and re-experience the pain of bereavement and loss, as we become ever more mindful of our own mortality, I pray that we might find comfort in God's loving embrace. In tribute to our departed, may we learn to overcome our fears of life's uncertainty by giving of ourselves to the service of others. May God grant us the assurances of Scripture: "Do not be afraid of unexplained terror, or the disasters that come upon the wicked ... for the Lord will be your trust."

*Ken yehi ratzon*, May we be so fortunate. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah*, May we be inscribed only for good in the Book of Life. Amen.