

YOM KIPPUR  
26 SEPTEMBER 2012

Christopher Hitchens was an iconic Washington figure. He died last December after an 18-month struggle with what he called “the land of malady” – i.e. esophageal cancer. In the course of that journey, Christopher Hitchens managed to complete seven essays for Vanity Fair – now published as a book under the title, Mortality. An eighth chapter consists of “fragmentary jottings” from his final days at the critical care unit at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston -- including the following terse comment: “To the dumb question ‘Why me?’, the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: “Why not?”

At a memorial service for Christopher Hitchens in New York City, his own words, crafted while he was already seriously ill, were shared with those in attendance. Here is what he said:

“The stupendous importance of love, friendship and solidarity has been made immensely more vivid to me by recent experience. I cannot hope to convey the full effects of the embraces and avowals, but I can perhaps offer a crumb of counsel. If there is anyone known to you who might benefit from a letter or a visit, do not on any account postpone the writing or the making of it. The difference made will almost certainly be more than you have calculated.”

Friends: Nobody eludes death – and especially on Yom Kippur at the Yizkor hour, we sense that inexorable reality all-too-keenly. But the essence of Judaism is not to obsess about death—not to wait for a crisis to react—but rather to build a life consciously, deliberately that becomes a statement of enduring purposes.

I believe passionately that as Jews we are gifted with extraordinary resources. They can guide us in sorting through the inherent “messiness,” confusion and uncertainties that life imposes. It also helps to know as J.J. Goldberg noted in a recent article on Jews and Judaism in the Economist that “Jewish is cool in America.”

So what do we have?

We have Torah—a text thousands of years old—brimming with values, ideas and messages that can inspire and challenge us –speaking

to our hearts and minds, even in 2012. “In the beginning, God” -- “Let my people go” – “You shall be holy” – “You shall teach your children” – “Justice, justice shall you pursue” – “Choose life” – these phrases have become immortal, precisely because they continue to matter.

We have Shabbat and the festivals—the calendar of the Jewish year—punctuating time with renewal, re-invigoration and joy—with “connection” to family and friends, to our tradition and history – and offering us a needed pause from our usual frenetic, technology-driven pace.

We have our Synagogue—vigorous, warm, welcoming and caring -- a mosaic of opportunities to engage in Jewish growth -- and reflecting a vision that is exceptionally broad and diverse.

We have Mitzvot – one of those distinctively Jewish but almost untranslatable concepts – a compendium of actions that take us from the abstract to the tangible, to the “here and now,” to: this is what I should do as a Jew.

We have Tikun Olam—literally “improving the world” – a mandate drawn from the teachings of the prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos – impelling us to look at the many needs of our community and our society and then beckoning us to “make a difference” through our energies and our commitments.

We have the Jewish people—an awesome human entity—here, in Israel and elsewhere—often confusing and exasperating, to be sure – but enjoying, as that essay in the Economist emphasized “an unexpected revival – which even a few decades ago could not have been anticipated” and, as a consequence, developing many new and creative forms for the expression of our Jewish identity.

And finally we have God—for some, the most complicated and elusive aspect of Judaism—but leading us – if we are open to the possibilities—to love, compassion and faith.

As Jews, we have so much: Torah -- Shabbat---festivals -- our Synagogue – Mitzvot -- Tikun Olam--our people and our God -- so much that has defined, elevated and shaped us over the millennia.

Let us be honest: Nothing ultimately staves off death – not even God. But the resources of Judaism – if we use them well and wisely – can

surely enable us to extract a greater measure of meaning, hope, courage and fulfillment for our journey of life.

As you will recall, Christopher Hitchens called his book, Mortality. But to me, the much more compelling question is:

How do we gain immortality?

The answer is within us:

by the way we live –

the relationships we forge –

the priorities we choose –

and the Jewish values we incorporate.

Immortality?

In the end, it is what others will remember about us by how we have used our gift of time.