

HHD Sermon: To Die While You are Still Alive

In preparation for this evening, my mind has been stalking a simple but provocative prayer: “Let me not die while I am still alive.” I don’t remember where I first encountered it - I think I was online - but I jotted it down on a yellow sticky pad and stuck it next to my computer so that most days I see it, at least once or twice. “Let me not die while I am still alive.”

What does it mean “to die while you are still alive?” It’s the kind of question that will bore a hole in your heart, make you cry or look the other way. It’s also a very appropriate question for this holiest of days, *Yom Kippur*, because it points us to essential things – our relationships, our work, our soul – enabling us to really see how we are doing. It’s also a good question for *Yom Kippur* because the focus of the day - sin, forgiveness, atonement - are ways in which we choose whether we will live or die while we are still alive.

In Hebrew the word for sin is *chet*, which really means “to miss the mark”, like in archery. In other words, Judaism understands sin as a mistake, not an essential aspect of what it means to be human. We are not “born in sin”. It’s like the difference between guilt and shame. When we make a mistake, we feel guilty, which is a good thing, in as much as it motivates us to change. Shame is when we become our mistakes – not, “I did a bad thing” but rather, “I am bad” - and feel sullied and permanently marred by what we have done. Shame is a much more destructive emotion than guilt. Yet, even when we sin, in the Jewish sense of the word, “miss the mark” and don’t correct our aim, there can be a high price to pay, a kind of death while we are still alive.

One of the most stunning examples of the caustic effects of a buried sin is illustrated in a true story I read in the New York Times Magazine a number of years ago called “After the Fire” by Kate Wenner. The story is about her dying father, their last months together and the horrible secret he revealed just before he died:

“Before his illness he always kept us at arm’s length. He was quick to anger...intolerant of scrutiny of any kind. And then, only weeks before I lost him I learned why. He had gone in only 8 weeks from being a skiing, bike-racing, dating man of 70 to a shrunken, exhausted soul with paper-white skin, and in this condition he revealed to my brother, sister and me the shameful secret he had kept buried since childhood: When he was 14, his mother and sister had deliberately set fire to their dry goods shop to collect insurance money. It was late at night, and the couple who lived in the apartment above the store came running out from the flames, screaming and carrying their children in their arms. They could have easily been killed.”

His father had no part in planning the arson, but he saw what happened, and it changed his life forever.

“I came from people who were despicable,’ he told us through a flood of tears. ‘They set this fire out of their own greed. I tried to excuse it by telling myself that survival forced us to do these things’. He looked anguished. ‘Survival? We had enough to eat. We had a place to sleep. We had our own store. Some of our neighbors considered us rich. To risk killing children so you can make a fancier store? That's evil. I was part of evil. Now you see why I'm ready to die?’

My brother asked, "Are you saying you deserve to die?"

'No, no,' he insisted. 'It's not that. It's that I'm tired of living with shame. I've held on to it all these years. I'm exhausted from trying to cover up, driving and driving myself. Dying is the way I can let go of it at last.’”

When I first read his story, it broke my heart. Imagine a person suffering their whole life for something they didn’t even do! Yet, he was a party to the crime and that was enough to eat him up inside – to die a partial death while he was still alive.

How hard it is to forgive ourselves of things we didn't do but feel responsible for!

- Children who are convinced their parents divorce is their fault
- Parents who believe that somehow they could have prevented the tragic death of their child.
- Survivors who blame themselves for surviving...

“Let me not die while I am still alive.” Easier said than done.

What about the stuff we are responsible for? What about our failing, weaknesses, sins of various kinds?

Of course, we must do everything we can to right our wrongs, pay our debts, set whatever is crooked, straight. Nevertheless, once we have done what we can to repair the damage, the life-affirming choice, the only way not to suffer a death of sorts while still living is to have compassion and to forgive ourselves.

For many years now I have been involved in a Buddhist meditation practice called Metta which is often translated as “Loving Kindness”. The basic practice is to wish yourself and others well. In short, it is a mantra meditation – a meditation where you repeat a phrase over and over again. There are many variations on the theme. For the past decade or so I have been saying: “May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be free from suffering. May I be at ease.” You start with yourself and then move in concentric circles out, first to folks you love like family, close friends, benefactors, and then to folks you struggle with – May you be safe. May you be... etc. The Buddhist practice extends to all beings, but I rarely get that far. In fact, I spend most of the time wishing myself well.

What I have found over the years of teaching this practice is that most people struggle to love themselves.

“May I be happy” ... “Who am I to be happy?” “May I be free from suffering”. “How can I not suffer while my husband/wife/partner/friend/etc. is suffering...”, etc.

This is the “kicker” about loving ourselves...

Self-love and forgiveness are married to each other and our ability to love and forgive ourselves is directly related to our ability to love and forgive others.

This is a real challenge because forgiving others is so important if we don't want to die while we are still alive.

Some of you may be familiar with the novelist Adam Gopnick who is also a regular contributor to the New Yorker. In his book, *Through the Children's Gate*, he writes about a child, Olivia, with an imaginary friend who she regularly speaks with; playing in her room, at the dinner table, etc. Then one day, she informs her parents that her imaginary friend died.

“She died!” (her mother) Martha says, genuinely shocked. “What did she die of?”

“She died of a disease called bitterness”.

“Bitterness!” her mother exclaimed.

Olivia nods grimly... “It could happen to anyone...”

“What might bitterness be? Bitterness born of betrayal and disappointment, jealousy and resentment... It is a plague: you see the buboes of bitterness swelling on your body, the flush of bitterness rising on your face, ... a cheerful person... becomes another grumbling, embittered crank...”

People die of bitterness all the time, they just don't know it...

“Bitterness”: Anyone one here suffer from bitterness? Perhaps the better question is who doesn't!

Let's rest here for a moment. Bitterness... How are we doing? How about with your family?... Work?... The congregation?...

We've been hurt, let down, disappointed. We tell stories about what happened, sometimes in our head, which is better, and sometimes to others, which isn't so good. And those stories may be true. Beware: the hurt voice,

the angry voice, the disappointed voice, the resentful voice—it lies! So you may be sure that those stories you’ve been telling about folks are true, but, have you ever really listened objectively and asked the question, “Are these stories really true, or am I just telling them because they serve some unhealthy need?”

The story that we don’t tell is that they, like us, want to be happy, connected to other human beings, forgiven and to forgive. And like us they want to love and be loved. They may not know how to do it, and they may have totally blown it with you or someone you love. But that does not mean they are no longer human, and to be human is to want these things. The other thing we usually miss all together is how toxic such a negative state of mind is for ourselves; having ill will towards others is self-inflicted pain. Just see what it’s like. “I don’t like that person; he hurt me.... G’errrrrr!” Feel that... It hurts us! It’s bad for us! It’s another way we can die while we are still alive both emotionally and physically.

Traditionally, Jews wish each other well during these Holy Days, we wish people well – *L’shannah Tovah*, etc.,.

So, let’s take a moment now; and, if you’re comfortable with this, I’d like you to close your eyes and picture a loved one in your mind’s eye and simply say to them, “May you have a sweet New Year.” If they’re sitting next to you, hold their hand. “May you have a sweet New Year”... Feels good doesn’t it? Now, imagine approaching someone you’re struggling with, with such an open heart. Imagine starting the New Year with a heart ready to love even those you struggle with.

I’d like to return now to where we started, with Kate Wenner’s story. In trying to cope with the loss of her father, she turned to Judaism for help. She was a neophyte but nevertheless, she entered into the rituals of *Yom Kippur*. She learned the word *teshuvah* and recited the *vidui* – the long list of transgressions from a-z. It was hard. She often felt lost and out of place, but it helped. She felt less alone, and most importantly, more alive; her father had died a thousands deaths while still alive but that was not a mistake she was going to make.

Yom Kippur can be a confusing time. On the surface it seems like a day about regret, remorse, our failings... We beat our chests and declare a long litany of bad things...*Ashamnu, Bagadnu....*

No doubt, remorse and regret are a part of the day, but *Yom Kippur* is much bigger than that. In fact, the overriding message often lost in the various

recounting of our sins is that *Yom Kippur* is The Day of Atonement (!), the day we are forgiven!

Did you know that another name for *Yom Kippur* is *Yom Harachamim*/The day of Compassion, the day God's infinite heart opens and flows over us, like a river. God as cleansing water... God as *Mikvah Yisrael*, the cleansing, renewing, purifying waters of the Jewish people.

In the Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning, Moses exhorts the people to “choose life so that you and your offspring may live”. Choosing life is the ultimate antidote for dying while we are still alive. Choosing life means facing our failings and trying to make them right. Choosing life means forgiving ourselves and others. Choosing life means developing a heart of compassion for others and especially ourselves.