

Valley of the Shadow

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Begin by singing:

Death don't have no mercy in this land,

Oh death don't have no mercy in this land.

Well he'll come to you house and won't stay long,

Next thing you know one of your loved ones will be gone.

Oh death don't have not mercy in this land...

Death. Death as a foil for life is an essential, pervasive theme of Yom Kippur. Finitude, the fact that our time is limited, finite, that we are not invincible, that what ever time we have is a gift to cherish—this is what this exceptional day in the Jewish year is all about. The kittle I wear, symbolic of a burial shroud, fasting, not bathing, and other forms of abstinence, a denial of the physical, all part of a one day rehearsal of our death. On Yom Kippur, writes the renowned author and teacher, Rabbi Michel Strassfeld, “we are meant to feel that the natural course of our existence is in the balance. We are to face what a permanent suspension of existence – death – would be like, and thus to learn how to embrace life.”

We live in a death adverse culture. But, when we do face death, either because we have to or we choose to, we are often surprised by the life giving awareness we gain. This happened recently to the renowned Bible Scholar James Kugel, one of my favorite writers on Bible today. He got cancer with a grim diagnosis – six-months, with treatment maybe a year, if he was lucky. Well 8 years later, no ones knows why, but his cancer is in remission and, he is still here. He wrote a book about his experience I want to share with you this evening. It is appropriately named, *In The Valley of The Shadow*.

In The Valley Of The Shadow covers a lot of ground. I won't have time tonight to explore the whole book, rather I want to focus on three perspectives Kugel gained from his near death experience, which he called

Smallness
Starkness
Boundary of the self

Smallness – most everyone has felt this before; it is all about perspective.

My first recollection of having such a feeling was sailing with my father. One time in particular stands out.

I was about 14 years old. It was just me and my Dad. We set out from Fort Lauderdale which a little north of Miami Beach. It was late in the afternoon. We were heading to Nassau in the Bahama's. I remember the swell of the Gulf Stream we were crossing was big – an endless sea of rolling 10 foot waves... But the thing that struck me the most was watching the glow of Miami beach set into the horizon... and then looking up at the sky full of more stars than I had ever seen in my life...

Smallness is all about perspective. It acts as a corrective to our often-puffed up sense of our selves; big, “on top of the world”, in control. Kugel insists that smallness is not just comparative, our smallness relative to the grandeur of the universe. It's more personal than that. It's the realization that we are just flesh and blood, confined to our own small physical space, limited by our personal, very human boundaries. What a shock it is when our bubbles burst, our fantasy of power and control, laid bare. Like the Greek myth of Icarus, we think we can soar sky high, only to find that our wings melt away and we plunge into the sea.

Smallness is a corrective to that fantasy, a reminder of our true place in the universe – a grain of sand, a fleeting moment, one breath, maybe two in the constant inhalation and exhalation of the life of the universe.

In Tenakh, smallness is eloquently expressed in God's response to Job “from the whirlwind.” It is one of my favorite passages in all of the Hebrew Bible. First, a little reminder of the story:

Job is a righteous person, who God tests in everyway – his children are killed, his property is taken, his body is ravaged with soars. Yet, Job refuses to curse God rather, Job demands an audience, an answer to his question, which is perennially ours – why do I suffer? What have I done to deserve such pain?

This is part of God's response from the whirlwind:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measures, do you know? Or who has stretched the line upon it? 6 Upon what are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its corner stone, 7 (Where were you) When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? 8 Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, as if it had issued from the womb, 9 (Where were you) When I made the cloud its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, 10 And prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, 11 And said, Thus far shall you come, but no further... Have you commanded the morning since your days began; and caused the dawn to know his place. ...16 Have you entered into the springs of the sea? Or have you walked in the recesses of the depth? 17 Have the gates of death been opened to you? Or have you seen the doors of deepest darkness?
...

What can Job say? What shall I answer you?” he responds. “ I will lay my hand upon my mouth. 5 Once have I spoken; but I will not answer; twice; but I will proceed no further.”

Job wants an answer to his questions about suffering, and we do as well, but none is forthcoming except the truth of our utter smallness in relationship to the Ground of All Being.

The truth of smallness comes at different times for different people:

For some, the awe of the ineffable brings life into perspective. This is certainly true for me. The ineffable is a view, an encounter, a perspective that takes us beyond words. William James in the late 19th century and latter Abraham Joshua Heschel describes these awe filled moments as the beginning of, the birth pangs of the religious experience. Here is an example:

Once I was some where along the Sonoma Coast. It was a rainy day and I was watching the surging surf... That in itself can invoke smallness! After a while, I took my eyes off the ocean and observed this seasonal creek rushing full of water... a flash of incite...in geological time, that little, seasonal creek could some day become like the Grand Canyon...

Another, perhaps more common way to smallness is as Kugel gets there, through personal illness or any life and death struggle that forces to face our finitude.

And then there are historical moments that, at least for a little while, offer a collective correction to our sense of omnipotence like, for example, the horrible earthquake in Japan. How small we all felt and not just by the destructive force of the earthquake and tsunamis. That would have been enough, but even more devastating to our false sense of power and control was the nuclear crisis that followed and that will be with us for centuries.

It doesn't matter how we get there, the result is the same, an often fleeting but revelatory perspective Kugel calls "starkness".

"Starkness" is just as it sounds – the broad outline of our existence, stripped down, spare, clear.

One of my favorite genres is the literature of war precisely because war, like death is a great foil for life – "starkness" is what war literature is all about. There is no better example than the exceptional Vietnam novel by Tim O'Brian called *The Things They Carried*.

Listen to his description of "starkness" which comes to him after a battle:

"After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost."

You don't have to go to war to experience "starkness" but we do have to face our finitude in some way, to get clear about what is of ultimate importance in our lives.

One of the blessings of being a rabbi is that I am often with people when "starkness" becomes apparent in people's lives – serious illness, death – regularly facing our finitude in these ways is not fun, but it does make for meaningful work. Often the conversation goes something like, "Rabbi, I see, for the first time, what is really important. It's amazing really, I've never been so clear about what I need, what my family needs. I'd rather have gotten it another way but now that I have it, I sure don't want to lose. Am I going to lose it?"

You see, when we are gifted with clear vision, we are instantly afraid we will lose it because we sense, how rare it is, and how demanding it can be. Starkness, if you live in that clear sighted reality, often demands change and change is not something we generally want to contemplate, at least not for very long.

For example, a common realization is that we work too much or our work is not meaningful. And, even though no one ever says on their death bed, I wish I would have worked more, or I sure am glad that I stuck that horrible dead end job out for those 30 years, changing our lives to work less or in a different way is not so easy. So, we often flee from "starkness", to a safer, and much more opaque reality.

Starkness can also come when some one we are close to is in their own life and death struggle. That was my first introduction, when my brother Willie got sick. Up until that point, the distance from Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz, combined with our busy lives kept us from getting together very often. You know how that goes. But then he got sick and all the sudden I found the time to regularly drive down to visit. Some of it was simply the urgency of the moment. And, some was a re-ordering of priorities, a clarity of meaning and purpose that starkness brings.

The grind of the Holy Days – all the services and other activities that start the month before in Elul, the prayers, the blasts of the shofar, fasting, all of it together – is to get us to a place of "starkness" where we can see our lives clearly and hopefully, adjust, do t'shuvah, so that we focus on what is of ultimate concern in our lives – meaningful work, right behavior, family, relationships, community. And, since starkness is not a permanent state, the time to make a change is now, to use the starkness of this day to be a new person in the year ahead.

The third point, "the boundary of the self", is harder to define and the most grounded in the particularism of Judaism. This is what it provokes for me:

How important is my individual existence – me, myself and I – in the grand scheme of things?

Judaism values the individual – "to save a life is to save a world" -but the individual is subservient to the group whether it be family, community, or "The Tradition". This focus on community is lost on many, even in the Jewish Community. Still, meaning for us is ultimately made in community. For example, we need a minyan – at least 10 adults – to have a full prayer service. Our prayers, even the petitions, the ones where we ask for things like health are in the first person plural – "we ask for...". Even our Master Story, the one story that more than any

other defines who we are, The Exodus from Egypt, is about the collective, the birth of a people, am yisrael.

It is hard, especially for rabbis to get this, but it is not about – me, myself and I – it is indeed about “us” the living and the dead.

Traditionally we say, zikhronam l’brakha when we remember the dead. What does that mean? Of course there is not just one answer. One thing that I take away from that phrase is the idea that as long as we incorporate into our own lives what was good and wholesome in the people we love and lose, they live on as a blessing in us. We in essence carry the memory and meaning of the people that came before us – they live in us. In that way they are a blessing and in that way, we “keep faith with those who sleep in the dust”.

A great question to ponder now is “who lives in through me? Am I manifesting the gifts they gave me, the blessings they left behind?”

Anyone seen the latest and last Harry Potter movie? There is this scene where Harry thinks he is about to die and he is speaking with his dead family. He is afraid and he asks them if they will stay close by his side. They tell him not to worry that they will always be with him in here (point to heart)

That is a very Jewish moment in a not very Jewish movie.

We don’t have to stand-alone. Our ancestors are with us. All we have to do is recognize them, see them, remember them, give them a place in here (point to heart).

“Smallness”, “starkness”, “the boundary of the self”; there is more to James Kugel’s book for sure, but these three ideas, perspectives, points of view, allow us to see are lives in the most meaningful of ways. We lose certain things, like the illusion of control and the false sense of our immortality, but we gain the realization of the urgency of the moment, the preciousness of even one breath.

While it is true that “Death has no mercy”, it is equally true that by facing the inevitability of death we can learn to make the best of what life we have.