

## **Yom Kippur 5775 Kol Nidrei: The world-to-come and the world-that-is-coming**

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There is a New Yorker cartoon drawn by Jewish cartoonist David Sipress I'd like to share. It could be titled "Death visits apartment 3B." The grim reaper is in an apartment building hallway. The resident of apartment 3B who has just answered the door, stands trembling in fear looking at a small envelope the Reaper is handing him. The caption reads "Don't freak out, it's just a save-the-date."

I don't think it was a coincidence that the cartoon came out on the 27th of Elul, three days before Rosh Hashanah, because this is the time of the Jewish year when we feel that life is in the balance and there are repeated references to our mortality and fragility.

Some see the restrictions on eating and drinking and sexual relations as indicating a death-like removal from normal life. Of course wearing the kittle, which is a shroud for burial is the most stark of these symbols. The central image of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, of books open in judgement with our names being written down as righteous or wicked for life or death feels like an image of *final* judgement. From my popular culture education in Christianity, it is parallel to having credentials checked at the Pearly Gates.

All these images remind us of the unanswerable question: "What happens after we die?" I frequently get asked what Jews believe about life after death. And the question comes out of a desire to have a way to think about what is unknowable. The answer, as with many things, is that there is no Jewish consensus. The response (although not an answer) in non-fundamentalist Jewish circles, is often to point out that Jewish practice and religious culture is not dependent on the afterlife. Jewish religion functions very well in the here-and-now so, dodging the question a bit, we can say that Judaism is much more interested in the possibility of life *before* death. While that is true, there is certainly a strong connection between Yom Kippur, Teshuva, death and what might follow. Here's an example from the Talmud:

Rabbi Eliezer would say: "Repent one day before your death." Asked his disciples: "Does a person know on which day they will die?" Said he to them: "That being the case, one should repent today, for [who knows] perhaps tomorrow one will die"; Thus, all our days should be passed in a state of repentance. [Talmud, Shabbat 153a].

So here is a classic use of death and afterlife as a motivations for actions in this world. [A pedagogical note: he did not say "Repent one day before your death" because that is what he thought people should do, he said it as a clever way to get his students to figure out that they needed to do teshuvah every day.]

In our thousands-year-old, multi-cultural multi-linguistic tradition there will be many many perspectives on the soul and its journey. Rabbinic Judaism certainly has a model for an afterlife, as does the mystical tradition, in fact many models. There is an idea of judgement after death and punishment for sin (short term, a year at most) and then eternal rest, if not bliss. Suffering in this world can also be a punishment for sin that lessens suffering in the world-to-come. In the text we read there is an implication of some kind of continued life in which it is much better to enter having done teshuvah.

The afterlife in Jewish Tradition: *haOlam ha'ba* in Hebrew, *alma de'atei* in Aramaic is usually translated as "the world-to-come." And the phrase is flexible. It is used for the world after the final redemption (meaning after Messiah) as well as for the place where we might go individually after death. *HaOlam ha'ba*.

This phrase is also sometimes translated as "the world-that-is-coming" which makes it more immediate. The phrase "*the world-that-is-coming*" also reminds us that the future, even the near future, is a mystery and we really do not know at all what is coming. The future is unknown and mysterious but one aspect is certain, an aspect we generally avoid but are pushed to contemplate at this time of year. At some point, "the world-that-is-coming" will include us as name and as memory but not as living body.

This opens up a new perspective on the question of teshuvah and death. *The world-to-come*, is a life after death, a place of bliss or overdue punishment or some combination of the two - of that we can't be sure. But *the world-that-is-coming*, the world where our presence is only in name and memory, *that* we do know for sure.

One version of this *world-that-is-coming* in the Reform liturgy I remember from my childhood (and similar things in our mahzor) "They still live on earth in the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory." I love that, but thinking about teshuva and the world-that-is-coming it presents a very partial picture. Because we remain present after we're

gone for *all* that we've done, not just the good, and *cherishing* is not the only thing that people do with the memories of those who have passed - particularly those who were not willing or able to make teshuvah.

There is a ritual for a person who wants to ask forgiveness from someone they have wronged who is no longer living. In this world however, there is no ritual for someone who has died to ask forgiveness *from* the living. That's why we're supposed to do it beforehand, and be attentive to it every day.

In the world-to-come, we depend on God's judgement. In the *world-that-is-coming* - this familiar world that will someday roll on without us - we are subject to the judgement of those people who remember us. I have very good news! Teshuvah is the appropriate preparation for both the world-to-come and the world-that-is-coming. [This is time for the annual *teshuvah* caveat that reconciliation is not always possible. In speaking about it last year, I compared this problem to that of a toxic waste site that had to be sealed off because it can't be cleaned up. That is sometimes true. Also true is you have to give it your attention and have to be responsible about how you seal it off and check each year if you have the resources for an appropriate clean-up.]

In the world-that-is-coming we will exist in name and memory. In the poem by Zelda, *Each of us Has A Name*, that we just read, she beautifully captures how, even when we are at the height of our powers, we are not in control of our name and reputation. As she expresses in the poem, we have many names and many identities. There are many perspectives on our life and we only control some of them. We have some control of the names we earn through our *work* our *celebrations* and our *sins*. But not the names given by the *stars* or the *mountains*, and certainly not those given by our *blindnesses*. There are the names we have for *ourselves*, these are our identities; there are the names, public and private, that other call us: these are our *reputations*. Another way to think of teshuvah is signing up for a good name in the *world-that-is-coming*.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes [7:1] which we will read a week from tomorrow on Shabbat of Sukkot, it says: A [good] name is better than good oil, and the day of death [better] than the day of one's birth.

א. טוב שם משמין טוב יום המות מייום הולדו:

RASHI comments: **a good name** is compared to good oil because, more than other liquids, if you pour [dirty] water into oil, the water floats and rises, and is recognizable, but other liquids- you put water into them, and they absorb it.

So the idea is not that a good name is sweet and pleasant, but that it is strong, that it has integrity and resists being diluted or corrupted. Rashi continues...

**and the day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth:** When Miriam was born, no one knew what she was. When she died, however, the well disappeared.

That is "Miriam's well" which midrash tells us went along with the Israelites in their desert journey because of the merit of Miriam, and when she died, the well dried up. Which is to say her life was a source of life and possibility and blessing that dramatically sustained the entire community.

Now Miriam isn't blameless. She also says things she should not and is called out by God. What allows a person, a flawed person, to make mistakes and still maintain a name with integrity is being able to admit when we are wrong, and take responsibility. This is why R. Eliezer gets his students to see they must have *teshuva* as a daily practice. But most of us fall behind and so this time of year comes to give us the opportunity to enter the new year ready for anything.

Here's why *teshuva* is the most Jewishly spiritual thing you can do. Some of you may recall when Rabbi Art Green was here he gave a teaching that he heard from his teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Why is our tradition so concerned about physical representations of God? Why do we have no icons, no venerated representations of the divine? It is not because physical representation of the Divine is impossible or improper, in fact the opposite, it is possible and extremely proper. We are forbidden to make those icons of wood or metal, however, because that might distract us from our potential and imperative to *be* those icons. We can choose to be representations of God. That is, for Heschel, the meaning of our being created in the image of God. That means we are supposed to find ways to manifest holiness in the world, like visiting the sick which I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah.

But on Yom Kippur it's much deeper than that because on Yom Kippur God *depends on us* to give forgiveness. God wants to forgive. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, we are not just the subjects of the Divine King, but royal children who have squandered our inheritance and have strayed into triviality and bad habits. God wants us to turn back. However, it is not just between us and God. There's also all those other icons and potential icons in the room. The passage we read this morning from the Mishnah says that your move back to holiness, your turning *depends upon* reconciliation with the other royal children. From the Mishna [Yoma 8:9]

Yom Kippur brings atonement only for transgressions between people and God.