

## **When Does Life Become Real?**

### **Yom Kippur 5780**

He was the principal of the Brighton Beach Yeshiva and she was a teacher. He was from Topping Avenue in The Bronx and she grew up in Brooklyn. He took a liking to her and she, to him. They began to court and on November the 4th 1944, they were married in a catering hall in Queens. They moved to Manhattan and four years later, in the middle of March, or thereabouts, they decided to start a family. Was it a decision by their pushy, anxious parents wishing to be grandparents already? Was it the fragrance of a spring breeze that stirred them? Perhaps a romantic love song on the radio? Whatever it was that fateful night. A kiss. A touch. An embrace and nine months later on December the 16<sup>th</sup> 1948 at 4:20 in the afternoon, I was born. A week later my bris. Thirty days later my pidyon haben and now, standing before you, a seventy- year old adult who asks the question “What happened?”

Seven decades later I am still mystified, in awe by what began on the Upper West Side in the spring and ended in the suburban town of Haddon Township in the winter. How did I come to be? What was I before I was born? What was I before I was conceived? And as I ponder my preexistence and a world without me, I shudder as I look not only back but into the future where once again, I will cease to exist. Nothing into something and then into nothing again. I am gripped by a symmetry that brings me no comfort. I am in a room surrounded by doctors and nurses. I am struggling for life. For air to breathe. And suddenly I am born. I am in a room surrounded by doctors and nurses. I am struggling for life. For air to breathe. And suddenly I am gone. The same vocabulary greets us and bids us farewell. Our coming and our going is the stuff of paradox. Remarkably unique and yet routine. Medically defined and yet in truth only the pretense of understanding. A smack. A cry. A journey begun.

What T.S. Eliot describes as ‘The dream crossed twilight between birth and dying’. Over the years I have learned much but over the years I have come to understand, that in truth, I know very little. I am an adult and yet, remain a child, stymied by what is arrayed before me. Overwhelmed by what is hidden in plain sight. After three score and ten I have many more questions than I do answers. Perhaps, I was warned on the eighth day of my life of what lay ahead. At that sacred moment I felt both pain and sweetness. The stroke of a blade and a sip of wine.

And so, for all of us, we entered the dream crossed twilight of our lives. We proceeded with a blissful sense of permanence, dismissing what was and what will be as we became immersed and preoccupied with life. We asked no questions. With clueless abandon we went forward. Crawling. Walking. Riding a bike. Stubbing a toe. Climbing trees. Playing Hide and Go Seek. Learning to read and write. Our life was happily ever after. It was fairy tales and make pretend. We were detached from the universe. We did not look into the heavens and reflect. We did not pass a graveyard and wonder. We went about our business and did not think great thoughts. The years passed and we moved beyond childhood but not very far away. We experienced triumphs and failures. Disappointments and celebrations. Love and rejection. Hiring’s and firings but we stubbornly clung to our sense of happily ever after. To fairy tales and make believe.

Though we began to slowly acknowledge that yesterday grew large and tomorrow ever shrinking. Though the evidence was piling up around us with every funeral we attended. With every shiva. With every kaddish, still we clung to the notion that we will never perish. Yes. We bought insurance. Yes, we bought cemetery plots. But with all our fiber we rejected that our day will come. We convinced ourselves that the home stretch had no finish line. That destiny had no closure. That the curtain

would never drop, and the stage of our show would never go dark. Our anthem had become the yiddish saying “Yeder mench veyst az ermuz shtarbn, aber keyner gloybt nit”—Every man knows he must die but no one believes it. From childhood on we have chosen to live in denial. But at some point, we must grow up. At some point we must come to terms with our shelf life and the unforgiving juggernaut of time.

I could not have written these words as a young man nor as a young rabbi. Years ago, life was a frolic, a carefree romp of endless days and limitless nights. Fear was on a roller coaster or perched on a high dive. For every ailment there was a cure. For every sunset there was a sunrise. For every winter, a spring. We were all Buzz Lightyear living our Toy Story, infinity and beyond. Adding candles to our birthday cake. Infinity and beyond. Cruising the world and running marathons. Infinity and beyond. We would stroll past our real estate of two and a half by eight and six feet deep. The beckoning hole is ours, but we chuckle smugly as it calls to us. ‘Go where you wish. Flee to distant lands. But one day this is where you’ll be.’ We cover our ears and think infinity and beyond. We should know better but don’t.

There is a wonderful tale about two Jewish neighbors arguing the boundary line that separates their adjoining properties. Yankel and Moishe go at it day after day. They are getting nowhere in their dispute and agree to consult the wisest man in town, the rabbi, to resolve their disagreement. The rabbi arrives. He listens to Yankel, strokes his beard and nods his head. He turns to Moishe. He listens, strokes his beard and nods his head. ‘Well rabbi, who is right?’ The rabbi says nothing but kneels down and puts his ear to the ground. He smiles and then he lifts himself up. ‘Yankel. Moishe. The field over which you are arguing was laughing. The ground told me that it doesn’t belong to you but that you belong to it’. As a child hearing that story,

I understood it to be a message of greed. Of obstinance. Of foolishness. As an adult the message of this story is profoundly different. It is not about a land dispute but about eternity. The soil beneath our feet is patient and the day will come when it will be our final resting place, when we pass from here to there.

And so the question I ask of myself, of us all, is when does life become real? When do we put away the fables? The fiction? The naïve, infantile hope of never me? None of us are strangers to death but somehow its intimacy is remote even when we are soaked in tears and rend our garments. Ben Sira tells us in the midst of grief and loss that we have been shown more than we can understand. Do we truly understand when life turns into death? Do we truly understand when a second turns into forever? When a pounding chest beats no more? When soft, supple skin turns gray and frigid in the blink of an eye? When 'is' becomes 'was' in a baffling instant.

I have been at the bedside of those who have died. Held their hands. Recited the shema and the confessional, on behalf of their morphined neshama. I have been there when machines have been turned off and plugs pulled, as families embraced and sang softly as their loved ones faded away. I have been there as tears flowed from a sweet man who knew he had but minutes left on this earth. I have been there when the exhausted soul uttered a final good bye with their last gasp and entered the olam haba with a smile. As wrenching as these moments are. As confusing as these moments are. As crushing as these moments are, and we have all had them; no matter how intense the love. No matter how deep the bond we remain spectators. It is a journey we do not take. An oblivion we do not enter. We leave the room. We walk away. Bereaved? Yes. Heart- broken. Yes. But we walk away.

We have seen more than we can understand though we were front and center. The thundering whisper of life and death's collision. An experience like no other. An exquisitely irretrievable moment that leaves us stunned. In time we recover. Our tears dry. We once again find laughter. We rise up and heal but slip back into the place of them and never me. 'Adam lahevel dama, yamav k'tzel oveir'-Man is merely a puff who fades like a passing shadow. The eloquence and brilliance of the Psalmist but the poetry belongs to others not me. I am invincible. Infinity and beyond.

When does life become real? When do we come to understand that we are not exceptions to nature's rule? That at one time we were not here and that there will be a reckoning when we return to that void. That the years between were no more than a tease. An illusion. A divine loan that will come due. "The way I see it", says Swifty Lazar," You get to do what you want to do and have a great life, then you have to die-that's the deal". We are constantly reminded of our deal though we turn away ignoring the obvious, dismissing the ever-present clues. We are surrounded by the evidence of our mortality. Master on the Main is not an architectural choice. Withdrawing from our retirement portfolios is not a fiscal choice. Not bending down to pick up something that has fallen is not a lazy choice. From early morn to days end we feel the flight of time. It is the invisible. The insidious. The unstoppable, silent force that drags us from youth to old age. From dawn to dusk. From departure to arrival in a flutter. We think we have captured it in a calendar, in a clock or with a wrist watch but at some point, we acknowledge its power, whimper, sigh and softly whisper, 'What happened?'

I remember when my children were born. I could not wait until they were old enough to go to Disney World. To enjoy the rite of passage I experienced as a child

in Disney Land. I counted down the years. The months. The days until we would head to Orlando when my children would walk down Main Street. Meet Mickey and Donald and Goofy. Ride the Jungle Cruise. Sing with the Tiki Birds and gaze at Cinderella's castle. It was an agonizingly slow wait for an anxious father...And poof. It was 29 years ago. And now, I am counting down the years. The months. The days till I can take my grandchildren.

Life becomes real when we accept the bewildering passage of time. When what we believe will never arrive is suddenly behind us. When the distant future becomes the distant past. When anticipation becomes nostalgia. More 'was' than 'will be'. It sobers us up but we press forward and go forth each new day we are granted. 'Are we there yet?' an impatient child asks on a long trip. 'Are we there yet?' an impatient adult asks as well.

'Congratulations. Today is your day. You're off to great places. You're off and away. You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And you are the guy who'll decide where to go.' Familiar? Dr Seuss's glorious book about starting off. But when we are at the far end of life these words take on new meaning and demand new understanding. His book closes...' today is your day. Your mountain is waiting. So, get on your way.' We must accept that the time comes for us all when we can no longer climb mountains. There comes a time when we accept, 'Oh the places we won't go.'

These past few years have been marked by change for me. A threshold passed that gently reminded me that the times they are a changing. That emeritus is a long way

from installation. That winding up and winding down are opposite ends of a career and of a life. That what remains is far less than what has been. And yet, I am in a pretty good place. I ignore what is lurking over the horizon. I pay no attention to what is around the bend. But permit me to share an event that I have not widely discussed, that changed me years ago in violent, terrifying fashion. An episode where I was face to face with the Malach Hamaves and came to understand harshly, suddenly that we are not here forever. That in the flash of a horrific, tragic moment, lives can perish, dreams turned into nightmares, tomorrows snatched away.

It was a pleasant fall afternoon sixteen years ago. I was performing an unveiling at Arlington Memorial Park. At the conclusion of the ceremony we all headed back to our automobiles when suddenly an elderly- woman pressed the accelerator instead of the brake. Her car hit three of us as it careened wildly across the grass. One elderly gentleman subsequently died from his injuries. One young woman required surgery and the implant of a steel rod. And I was scooped up by the hood and flipped over the car. As I laid there in shock, my body froze but I was able to wiggle my toes and fingers. Cindy was called and I still remember her tears as they flowed from her eyes and hit my face. Within minutes the sound of sirens filled the air. Blue lights. Red lights flashing. The EMTs put me in a neck brace, slipped me onto a board and lifted me into a van. We headed to the trauma center. I was examined and released hours later. My body ached. I was sore and limped for six months.

That experience shook me up in ways no other event in my life has. As I replayed the accident over and over in my head, I shivered each time. I remembered crying out 'Oh my God' as I was hit by the rampaging car in the eternity of seconds. I imagined what would have happened had the car run me over and not tossed me, miraculously, in the air. The mechanics of retirement. Moving across the hall.

Changing bima seats. Sitting with the congregation brought me to the realization that indeed life is real. But so did the events of September 2003.

The young chassid approached his rebbe. 'Master. I am distraught. I pass by the graveyard and I see death. I walk pass the slaughter house and I see death. I walk through the fields of wilted flowers and the forests of fallen, splintered trees and I see death. I am unable to sleep at night. I am unable to study Torah during the day. What am I to do?'

Replied the rebbe. 'Mine kind. Du zalst nisht mura far toyt' - 'My child. Do not fear death because all the while you fear death you are alive.'

The rabbi's words of comfort were clever. Reasoned. Expressing fear of death is actually an affirmation of being alive. But the rabbi's Talmudic reasoning was directed at a young, healthy man whose issue with death was born of angst not of illness nor age.

For those of us who are confronting the reaper we know that we are here, in the land of the living, but we also know, having passed through many gateways, we possess a seasoned wisdom, a disquieting vision, that can think and peer into places beyond today. And so, we think the unthinkable. We imagine the unimaginable. We acknowledge the impossible as possible. And we shudder as we seek balance on the edge of the abyss.

Life finally becomes real when we accept that death is real. When we accept that there will come a morning when no longer, will we recite 'Modeh Ani' and head off to breakfast. When no longer will we wallow in elusion. Embrace myth. Trust the seduction of a mirage. In whatever time we have left we think differently. We stare

at our hands. At our toes. At the familiar reflection that has greeted us for years in the mirror, understanding that our heart will stop beating and that a priceless treasure is but one more breath.

Somehow, we are transformed at a magical tipping point of mind and body. At a moment of truth where we come to accept the flight of time and mortality. We have left the playground and childhood behind. Suddenly we have become adults. Perhaps two powerful verses from our tradition express our awakening better than any other. ‘Yamai kalu mini ah reg’- My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle. And, ‘Adonai natan v’Adonai lakach’-God has given and God takes away. We grow up and these two mysteries collide and stir our soul like no other. We blink and forever close our eyes. We come to accept, with a tortured reluctance, that someday we will lay still and silent beneath the grass. Never again to stretch in the dawn. Never again to marvel at a sunset. Never again to look up at the stars.

I was conceived in New York. I was born in New Jersey. I will be buried in Georgia. I was nothing. Then something. And I will be nothing once again. I am not happy about it. I wish it was somehow different. But my friends, that’s the deal.

In the meanwhile, I am looking forward to Disneyworld.