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Yizkor 5783

Living with Loss

Five times a day, for the past few weeks, my phone has buzzed with an alert that says: "Don't forget, you're going to die." No, I am not receiving death threats – yet. It is from an app I downloaded called "WeCroak." As in, "one day, we are all going to croak." The app is based in a Buddhist tradition from Bhutan that teaches that contemplating death five times a day brings happiness. So, at five random times every day, I receive this message. Rachel is not a fan. I admit that it's a bit weird, and more than a little unsettling, but that's the point. The alert forces me to stop what I'm doing, and bluntly reminds me that whatever I am busy with is only temporary.

Each alert I receive also comes with a quote. Some are witty, like this one from Mark Twain:

"I do not fear death. [That's because] I had been dead…before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenient from it."

Others are thought-provoking, like:

Victor Hugo: "It is nothing to die. It is frightful not to live."

Paul Tsongas: "No one on his deathbed has ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time on my business.'"

Franz Kafka: "The meaning of life is that it ends."

One quote was even from the great 12th century rabbi Maimonides! You can only imagine my excitement when that popped up. It said: "We each decide whether to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly. No one forces us…We are responsible for what we are."

Though WeCroak was inspired by Buddhism, it could have also come from our tradition. Yom Kippur is a day where we are forced to confront our own mortality. We refrain from eating and drinking, wear white shrouds like this *kittel*, and repeatedly recite the *Viddui*, the confessional, which is the same name of the prayer that we say for someone on their death bed. We pray to be inscribed in the book of life. Yom Kippur reminds us that our time is limited.

This is an uncomfortable idea. And it is countercultural. Our culture valorizes youth. Millions of products and services are sold each year as fountains of youth. But they are temporary. As the Psalm says, "Threescore and ten our years may number, fourscore years if granted the vigor…life quickly passes and flies away…"

Have you felt that way this year? During those long days and short years? We come here today to remember our parents and our grandparents, our spouses and our siblings, our children and our friends. We feel their absence on holidays, on special occasions and on moments when we just want to give them a call. We miss them terribly. How quickly it feels like our time with them passed by. Still, our memories of their lessons, their love and their lives remain.

Almost two months ago, I felt this deeply. At the end of my sabbatical, I brought my kids to Minneapolis to spend a week at Camp Bubbie and Zaydie. I was only going to stay for the first couple days, so as not to ruin their fun. But soon after I arrived, I learned that the father of a close friend had passed away. This friend is someone I had known since preschool. She was actually my preschool girlfriend! As we grew up, we remained close through high school and, even though we went to different colleges, and settled in different places, we stayed in touch here and there. You know those people who you don't see or

even talk to that often. but with whom you still feel very close? She is that type of friend. Because of our friendship, I had known her father for just about my whole life, though I had not seen him for the last many years. Still, when I heard that he had passed away, I felt a deep sadness. This was my first lifelong friend who lost a parent, and it was not only sad, it was sobering. It hit me more than any alert on my phone ever could.

I changed my ticket to be at the funeral. There were many familiar faces from the past, people I hadn't seen in years. That was comforting, and I hope it was for the family too. My friend's father is now someone I will think about at Yizkor. Losses like these make us reflect on our own mortality. And on the mortality of those we love.

But what do we do with this reflection? What is our confrontation with life and death today, on Yom Kippur, meant to teach us? WeCroak thinks that being reminded of our morality will help us live with more joy. This idea is also found in the Jewish tradition. A 19th century rabbi named Simcha Zissel Ziv taught: "Remembering death in the proper way can bring a person to the ultimate joy.'" That's because when we remember that our time in this world is limited, we can better appreciate the joys in it. Joy and happiness are indeed important parts of life, but is this all we seek?

No. There is more. Life is also about meaning. This is what one of the most, if not *the* most, powerful prayer in our *mahzor* teaches. The Unetaneh Tokef is a prayer that contains a series of scenes that summarize the themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It opens in the heavenly court. God is on the throne of judgment, with a book open signed by all of us with our deeds. The shofar sounds. The court is in session. Even the angels tremble.

Next we are told what is at stake: nothing less than our fate. Who will live, who will die, who will prosper, who will suffer, who will be at ease, who will face strife, who will fall, and who will rise. But this prayer is not fatalistic. There are things we can control. *Teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah* remove the severity of the decree. Nothing is final. In the heavenly tribunal, God, the judge, is open to appeal.

Unetaneh Tokef concludes with a meditation on the fragility of life. Our lives are compared to: a broken shard, withering grass, a shriveled flower, a passing shadow, a fading cloud, a fleeting breeze, a vanishing dream. But God is eternal. As the medieval Rabbi Moshe ibn Ezra wrote, "We are children of this world, but God has set eternity in our hearts."[1]

When we get to this prayer in *Musaf*, take a look at the commentary by Rabbi Leonard Gordon in our *mahzor*. He writes, "We are not praying to be spared an ending in death. We are not even asking that death be postponed. Rather, after reminding ourselves relentlessly of the many ways that life might end, we tell ourselves that the way to cope with ultimate vulnerability is through *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. Our goal is not security, but a life of meaning that recognizes our vulnerability, but rises beyond it."[2]

What is a life of meaning? Listen to how Rabbi Jonathan Sacks answers that question in his commentary on the Unetaneh Tokef:

> We only have one life, and however long it is, it is a mere microsecond in the history of the universe. The greatest decision we will ever make is how to use our time, how to create something of beauty and meaning and love that was not there before. We find meaning through a life well lived, in pursuit of the good for its own sake…The paradox of altruism is that the hope we give others returns to us undiminished and

[1] Koren Mahzor Commentary p. 843
[2] Mahzor Lev Shalem p315

> enlarged. Something momentous is born every time a human being makes the decision not to rail against the evils of the world, but instead to do something to alleviate them. This *ethic of responsibility* is Judaism's great contribution to the world… We may be mortal, but we are God's partners in the work of creation, and that is as close to immortality as we will ever come."[3]

Confronted with our morality, the Unetaneh Tokef tells us to make our lives meaningful by living well. Lending a hand, giving what we can, and sharing what we have with those in need. This makes us God's partners, and makes our impact on the world outlast our time in it. As the quote from the great Greek statesman Pericles that WeCroak sent me last week said: "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others." We live a life of meaning when we live with an ethic of responsibility.

We can learn this lesson not only when we are confronted with death, but with any kind of loss, especially when unexpected loss touches us. This is what happened to former New York Times columnist Frank Bruni, who wrote a moving memoir this year called <u>The Beauty of Dusk: On Vision Lost and Found</u>. Here is how he opens his book:

> "I went to bed believing that I was more or less in control of my life—that the unfinished business, unrealized dreams and other disappointments were essentially failures of industry and imagination and could probably be redeemed with a fierce enough effort. I woke up to the realization of how ludicrous that was.
> I went to bed with more grievances than I could count. I woke up with more gratitude than I can measure. My story is one of loss. It's also one of gain.[4]

[3] Koren Mahzor Commentary p. 851
[4] Frank Bruni <u>The Beauty of Dusk: On Vision Lost and Found</u>. Pg 1

What happened is that one morning Bruni woke up with his vision blurred in his right eye. He first thought it was goo or gunk, but it wouldn't go away. So he took a hot shower, drank some extra coffee, and tried to get on with his day. But his vision remained horribly blurry. He finally called his ophthalmologist and made an appointment. He referred Bruni to a specialist. She examined him and gave her diagnosis: he had had a stroke while he was sleeping. This caused irreparable damage to his right eye. And that wasn't all. There was a decent chance the same thing could happen in his left eye. He could completely lose his sight.

There were no medications or treatments for his condition. He enrolled in painful drug trials, but none of them worked. So he was forced to adjust to his loss of vision. He writes about how this impacted him:

> In my mid-fifties, I was where a great many people find themselves in their midsixties and a great many more do in their midseventies. I was stripped of delusions about my physical indestructibility, and I watched the parameters of possibility shrink. No, scratch that, I watched the parameters of possibility *change.* I was learning the importance of interpreting what had happened to me with that kinder, gentler language. It was not only a valid interpretation. It was also the healthy, happiness-preserving one.[5]

Interpretation. Rabbi Lewis was fond of teaching about the expression "*mazel tov*." We usually translate that as "congratulations," which is what we mean when we say it. But this is not its literal meaning. In the Talmud, a *mazel* is a constellation of stars. Rabbi Lewis used to say this teaches us that whatever the stars, the fates, send you, you have the capacity to make it good. So when we say *mazel tov*, we are really saying "May you make

[5] Bruni 23

whatever life has given you good." Often times, how we choose to interpret what happens in life determines how we live it.

Bruni continues to write about how his interpretation of his condition impacted his life. Listen:

> "Strangely, I began to feel more alive, more attuned, more appreciative. Did that make me a sort of cliché? You bet…My world blurred, but it also sharpened. I held my breath; I exhaled. I said hello to new worries; I said goodbye to old ones. A clever friend of mine summed up my status wittily and well: 'When one eye closes another opens.'"[6]

What that newly opened eye did was look harder, longer and…more soulfully at everything around him, starting with his acquaintances and friends. Loss can be constraining. It can cut us off from friends and loved ones. But it can also open us up to the beauty and the blessings of the people and the world that surround us. It just depends on how we see it. We can find meaning when we look for it.

Here is a final story about how we can find meaning even in loss. I found it in an obituary in the New York Times from last week. I borrowed Jane's copy. The title caught my eye. It said: "Ilse Nathan and Ruth Siegler, Sisters and Survivors Together, Die 11 Days Apart."[7] Here's how it starts:

> "One day in 1944 at the Birkenau concentration camp in German-occupied Poland, Ilse and Ruth Scheuer saw their father for the last time.
>
> 'You two are young, maybe you will survive,' Jakob Scheuer told them. He raised his hands toward their heads and, in a voice choked with emotion, gave them a Hebrew blessing:

[6] Bruni 23
[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/23/us/ilse-nathan-ruth-siegler-scheuer-dead.html

יְבָרֶכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ׃

May God bless you and watch over you

יָאֵר ה' ו פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ׃

May God cause His face to shine upon you

יִשָּׂא ה' ו פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם׃

May God lift His face to you, and bless you with peace

Jakob was soon sent to the gas chambers. Ilse and Ruth were separated from their mother and never saw her again. Their brother, Ernst, died at another concentration camp.

But these sisters survived, and remained close. They lived near one another in Birmingham, Alabama for decades. They married, had children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. They celebrated Jewish holidays together, attended shul together, and spoke to each other every day. They also became active in Holocaust education, speaking to school and community groups in Birmingham. Ruth even wrote a memoir about her experience. In it, she recalled those last moments with her father in Birkenau. She wrote, "I did not know it at the time, but my father's blessing would have to last me a lifetime."

What are the blessings that you received from your father or mother, sister or brother, husband, wife, children, grandparents or friends that you carry with you to this day? We don't need an app to remind us that life is short, so we do our best to make the most of the time we have. We do that by living. Throughout our lives, we all encounter losses that make us confront our own mortality: the loss of loved ones or our own physical diminishments. Judaism teaches us to try and confront loss by living lives of joy, of meaning, and with the conviction that we can achieve a measure of immortality through the good that we do for others. Now it is time for us to remember how our loved ones did this for us, and think about how we can build on their legacy. How we can pass on the blessings

they gave us, so they last even beyond our own lifetimes. We live with loss, and we live with greater meaning when we remember. It's time for Yizkor.