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Sermon delivered at B'nai Tikvah

Yom Kippur: Introduction to Yizkor

The presence of absence: Mourning during a Pandemic

Gemar Hatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed for the New Year in the book of life.

This year, in January, my mother died. These past months, living into my new role as a grandparent and no longer having a mother or father to call and visit, to share news with and to ask my most practical questions, I have of course thought a lot about what I believe about life and death, mortality and the afterlife. This morning, as we prepare for the Yizkor service of memory, I will share some stories and ideas that have helped me confront the mysteries of death and conclude with some reflections on mourning during a pandemic, when there has been a global confrontation with death unprecedented in our generation.

From the earliest times, philosophy and religion respond to mysterious and unsettling questions: what is death and what, if anything, happens to us after our

bodies cease? In the face of loss and mortality, how do we live meaningful and moral lives?

If you go to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, at the start of the permanent exhibition are caskets and ritual items associated with burial. Rituals of burial are the first sign of civilization. And the most ancient rituals of burial reveal our anxieties about death. People are buried with hands and feet bound and their bodies are placed in containers. Symbolically and practically we may suppose that our ancestors were worried that the dead return, and they are angry – perhaps jealous of the living, perhaps upset about how they died. From ancient times until our own, remembering the dead, placating them, and staying connected to them remain central to our observances. Jews traditionally bury in wooden caskets to allow the body to return to the earth, and we light candles, during shiva, at yizkor and yahrzeits, to enable us to stay in communication with the abiding souls of people we loved.

In my own response to death, there are three teachings that have been especially meaningful to me. One is 2,000 years old and was written by a Roman philosopher, one is a timeless folkstory retold in many traditions. The third is what I have gleaned from Jewish traditions, with some support from physics, about the continuity of matter and energy, body and soul.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus, founder of Epicureanism, is often remembered as approaching life as a celebration of this world, something akin to Hedonism. But that is a misunderstanding. Epicurus begins from humanity's fear of what happens after death. His goal was to free people from that fear. This is a noble goal. Today, our fear may be less about punishment after death and more about oblivion, the fear that death is the end of the story and that nothing of ourselves survives. Epicurus already understood, correctly, that everything is made of atoms and that atoms move from a compact state to a more diffused state over time. He believed that as we age, our body becomes less stable as our atoms spread out. This vision makes obvious that the death of the body is an unavoidable consequence of living, a continuation of the process begun at birth.

But what about God? If there is no afterlife, is there a God and is God worthy of being worshipped? According to Epicurus there are gods, and unlike us, they are immortal. But their immortality comes from their ability to hold their atoms together and to make sure, through an act of divine will, that their atoms do not move apart but stay strong and bonded. So the gods are immortal and unchanging, but that is all they are. For Epicurus, holding your atoms together, it turns out, is a full time occupation. Gods exist, but they can neither harm us nor help us. They are immortal but static.

In this world view, morality means living a life that tries to emulate the gods by doing all we can to keep our atoms together for as long as we can. Far from preaching unbridled pleasure, Epicurus taught that we should live lives of moderation and containment. In food and drink, sexuality and exercise, seek the middle ground, not too much, not too little. Live in accordance with what nature teaches will lead to a longer, healthier, and happier life.

While Epicurus offers an approach to living, he ultimately does not explain what happens to us after death. That mystery has been the subject of many stories but certainty eludes us. I find one story, retold in many religious traditions including our own, especially profound in how it offers a metaphor for death in an image of life.

Once upon a time twins were conceived in the womb. Weeks passed and the babies grew. As their awareness grew, their joy increased. "Isn't it fantastic that we have been conceived? Isn't it wonderful to be alive?"

The twins began to explore their world.

When they discovered the umbilical cord that bound them to their mother and nourished them, they sang for joy. "What great love our mother has for us. She even shares her own life with us!" However as the weeks grew into months, they suddenly noticed how they had changed, and that if they continued to grow, they

would outgrow their space.

"What does this mean?" one asked.

"It means that our stay in this world will soon end" the other replied.

"But I don't want to leave," the first retorted, "I would rather stay here forever."

"We don't have any choice" the other replied, "but maybe there is life after birth!"

"How could there be" the first asked, doubtfully. "We will lose our lifeline and how could we live without it? Besides, others left the womb before us and no one has ever come back to tell us that there is life after birth. No, birth is the end!" So one of them went into a state of deep anxiety, asking: "If conception ends in birth, what meaning has life in the womb? It is absurd. Maybe there is no mother behind all this."

"But she must exist," the other protested, "otherwise how could we have got in here? And how could we survive?"

"Did you ever see our mother?" asked the first. Maybe she only lives in our imagination. We invented her, because in this way we can better understand our life."

And so the last days in the mother's womb were filled with thousands of questions and a great fear. Finally, the moment of birth came.

The first twin left the womb and cried. The other, momentarily grievously bereft mourned her loss. And then she, too, left the only home she had ever known and what she then saw was beyond her wildest imaginings.

What she had witnessed when her twin left the womb was birth, not death.

The most poignant part of this story is the instant when the skeptical twin is proved right and she finds herself alone. For those of us who have known intimate loss, all of life is, in some ways, the experience of that mysterious grief. Whether or not we worry over our own fates and our own mortality, the shock of despair, the sense of walking through our lives permanently accompanied by felt absence does not abate.

Some among us today have lost a child, a partner, a parent, a sibling or a dear friend this year. I lost my mother, who died not of COVID, but arguably because of it – she faced the inadequacies of emergency care in NYC's overburdened hospitals during the omicron surge, where she found herself without the care she needed.

I felt some anger. And I feel her missing from her place at our holiday table and her usual seat in the front row today. I miss the sound of her voice and her physical presence. I miss her defending my children from whatever wrong thing I said.

As I speak with you, I know that nothing, no faith, no explanation – actually relieves the loneliness of being without people we love. But the stories and ideas I am sharing offer us the chance to feel enough humility in the face of life's mysteries so that we open our hearts in wonder, to the possibility that what we do not know with certainty might be infinitely consoling.

The story of the twins reminds us that while we understand a great deal about our world; life and death, from time immemorial, remain mysterious. We do know that our bodies are composed of DNA and matter that goes back to the beginnings of the universe, and when we die, this matter persists, in new forms. Our souls, that which animates us, is similarly real and like all energy can not be destroyed; our souls are immortal.

And this leads me to a final perspective, one that emerges most specifically out of Jewish traditions about God and the soul. We recite in our prayers: Elohi Neshamah Shenatata Bi Tihora Hi. “God, the soul you have placed in my body is

pure.” In Judaism, we understand that every living being has a soul, and the soul in each of us is made of the same stuff. If you were to gather all of the individual soul presences in all living beings, that would be God; God is the sum total of all souls. God is the thread that is woven through all of us. Over our lifetimes our souls are impacted by our bodies, by our choices in life. With death, the soul begins a journey to return to its original state of complete purity. Each soul, and the traces of our lives imprinted on our souls, continues, and when we say kaddish, when we light candles, when we share memories, when we do good deeds in memory of our departed, we speed them on their journeys of purification. This is my best understanding of the classic Jewish view of death and that which abides.

Our body returns to the earth from which it came, and our soul returns to the great collection of soul stuff, much like a wave crashes down and rejoins the ocean.

A few weeks ago, I was taking a walk with a friend, a very well-read mathematician and classicist. I asked him, “after all your study, what do you think happens to the soul after the death of the body?” His response, “the soul is immortal, but I am not sure that it carries our personalities.” I don’t know the

answer to his uncertainty, of course, but increasingly I am not bothered by it either. I try to live my life with the understanding that I have a bit of divine soul in me that enables me to be my best self and to connect with love to those around me who also have a soul that connects us. Perhaps this is what we mean when we say that everyone is made in God's image. The connections made in life between two embodied souls can not end with death. We feel the tug.

An article in the NYTimes last year pointed out that in the course of a lifetime an average American spends about 20 years with their parents. 19 of them are generally during the first 19 years of your life. In a mobile society like ours, the last year of close contact with parents is, at best, divided over the course of the rest of your life. COVID robbed many people of that time across generations. It might have been our limited time with grandchildren, or time travelling, or time going out with friends. COVID has been a thief, and we need to recapture lost time by not wasting time and by reconnecting actively with people and activities we love. A few weeks ago Nancy Swartz shared with me her open letter to COVID, something she wrote to help herself and friends deal with the losses of the pandemic. I want to share her final paragraph.

“And when I once again celebrate and dance in joy with family and friends, and feel their loving arms around me, I will never lose sight that for me, right here, in that embrace, I will be in the most beautiful place in the world.”

So again, this year, as our nation counts over 1,000,000 deaths from COVID since 2020, I want to close this introduction to our Yizkor service with a yizkor prayer for those who have died from the pandemic. Lives tragically cut short, many needlessly. As you listen to these words you might think of those you know who have been stricken, of the caregivers and those who put themselves at risk to save others, and of the smaller losses, of comfort and control, of travel and hugs, setbacks at work and school. And as you grieve your own personal losses, focus on valuing your ongoing connections with people you loved who have died.

God of consolation,
Surely you count in heaven,
Just as we count here on earth,
In shock and in sorrow,
The souls sent back to You,
One-by-one,
The dead from the Covid pandemic,

As the ones became tens,

The tens became hundreds,

The hundreds became thousands,

Then hundred-thousands,

And now millions upon millions.

Each soul, a heartbreak,

Each soul, a life denied.

אל מלא רחמים, שוכן במרומים,

המצא מנוחה נכונה על פני השכינה,

במעלות קדושים וטהורים כזוהר הרקיע מזהירים,

לכל הנשמות שנספו במגפת הקוביד.

God, full of mercy, who dwells on high,

Provide a sure rest on the wings of the Divine Presence,

Among the holy, pure and glorious, who shine like the sky,

To the souls of all who died in the Covid pandemic.

God of wisdom,

We pray for the souls of those taken too soon,

Those who were vulnerable and unprotected,

Those who were sacred and forsaken,

Those who died on ventilators,
Whose funerals were lonely,
Who didn't need to die,
And those who died alone,
God of healing,
Bless those who stand in service to humanity.
Bless those who grieve.
Bless the dead,
So that their souls are bound up in the bond of life eternal.
And grant those still afflicted
With disease or trauma
A completed and lasting healing,
One-by-one,
Until suffering ceases,
And we can stop counting the dead,
In heaven
And on earth.
And let us say: Amen.

This morning as we are thinking about life and death and what remains, we might do so with the knowledge that while we may not know with certainty what awaits us in the world that is coming, our lives can be the best answer to the really important question: what can life mean in the face of mortality? We must imagine how we should live our lives with the understanding that death is a process of becoming, and that the story of our lives extends to a time before our birth and after our soul leaves the body.

In that spirit, we take a moment now to recall the lives of members of our B'nai Tikvah congregational family who died since last Yom Kippur. This list includes long time and beloved members. Each of them left a mark and are well remembered today. At B'nai Tikvah, we remember

Sheldon Tandler

Harriet Rossen

Adele Levenson

Paula Swartz

Warren Foreman

Elaine Winer

Irving Lipsky

Mark Modest

Lois Jaynes

Edward Freedman

And Arthur Simon.

May their memories continue to be for a blessing.

Let us take a moment for those who are leaving during the yizkor memorial service to do so, please leave quietly through either of the exits in the back or the side of the room.

We rise now as the Torah scrolls are placed on the reading table, for the yizkor service. We will recite the service from our Memorial booklets.