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Sermon delivered at B'nai Tikvah  
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#### INTRODUCTION TO YIZKOR:

#### WHAT WE LEARNED IN 5781 ABOUT DEATH (AND LIFE)

Gmar Hatimah Tovah, may we all be inscribed in the book of life, health and happiness for the year ahead.

“Who shall live and who shall die” is a refrain of these High Holy Days. This past year, spent under the shadow of the COVID pandemic, has awakened us ever more sharply to the reality that we are mortal. We are now hyper-aware that there are dangers impacting our health in the world around us and in the choices we make. This year going indoors to a restaurant, coming to synagogue, wearing a mask while shopping, all became fraught exercises involving many small decisions. This massive shift in awareness and sensitivity has heightened our collective anxieties and fears for ourselves and those we love.

Yom Kippur, with its emphasis on life’s finitude, reminds us that we all face loss. The Yizkor service of our Holy Days – perhaps especially on Yom Kippur – insists on the value of remembering and memorializing.

In these past few days, commemorations of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, like President Biden’s insistence on memorializing the untimely deaths caused by the pandemic during which

we are living, offer the consolation that people are not forgotten and that lives are honored beyond our time walking the earth.

So, too, naming for our dead and seeing the traits of our beloveds in the living offer a kind of reassurance that something more than our imperfect memories capture and sustain the presence of the dead in our lives. Lori often points out to me, especially as I age, how she sees my father in me in my gestures on the bimah, and knowing that my grandchild preserves his name extends the presence of my father in the world into a far further future. I allow myself to picture a someday when my daughter and I will tell this newborn about the men whose name he carries.

Jewish imaginative literature and hard science, however, offer other compelling ways for us to think about the transition and continuities between life and death.

Some of you may remember Dara Horn's image at the end of her novel, *THE WORLD TO COME*, where the dead teach the soon-to-be-born, imparting to them mannerisms and ideas, preferences and habits. Horn's fantasy explains the complex interplay of heredity and environment in linking generations. Her insight that generational continuity is one form of immortality, weakens the hard closure that death seems to be. The legal definition of death suggests such hard closure. According to the uniform determination of death act of 1981, death is the cessation of heartbeat, breathing or brain function. But the medical definition misses a lot in our experiences of the nuances of life and death. Looking at death from the perspective of the body, we die small deaths every day. Our cells are replaced daily, red blood cells, for example, live for about 115 days. Living is a process of endless dying and renewal. Jewish

prayers imagine that when we go to sleep at night the soul leaves the body to refresh and return in the morning. In the insight of the siddur, every day is a new rebirth.

What is true in cycles of daily life, remains true after death. The bonds that hold the body together continue on their path of decay and regeneration, much like harvested fruit ripens and the pit of a fruit yields a new tree. The energy, the soul, that animates a body in life, continues. That which is decay from one perspective is growth from another. When we buried my father-in-law, a cousin, who is a scientist, said, "Rudy loved nature and I'm glad he is being buried beside such a beautiful tree." I thought he was referring to some kind of comfort the tree would bring to Rudy's soul, like the ancient cultures that buried their dead with the possessions they would need in the afterlife. But it turns out cousin Bill was referring to Rudy's opportunity to serve nature. He went on to say, "his body will nourish the tree." This sentiment is another way to interpret the Jewish prayer that affirms how the dead are caught up in the bonds of life eternal.

Left to its own, the process of the body changing will continue until our bodies morph into something new. Our physical body enters the earth and lives again in that which is nurtured by the earth, vegetation and animal, even human life. Our genetic material lives on in new hosts, and our personalities survive in others we influence, often in ways that are invisible to us. One of the special things about being a teacher or a rabbi is that you sometimes find out while you are still alive that you changed the lives of others. Sadly, for many of us our own influence is less obvious while we are alive, but often becomes the focus of conversation in a shiva home.

Body and soul, genes and personality, all existed before you and continue afterwards. BJ Miller, writing in the New York Times about death in the aftermath of COVID, tells the story of a woman dying of cancer. In the age of COVID “her friends were finally able to relate to her uncertainties. These times are shaking people into clarity. That clarity may be experienced as sorrow or discomfort, but it is honest and real, and that itself is a powerful sign of life.”

That death is not a hard closure is something we often experience on this side of life when ordinary losses make us feel that a part of ourselves has died. I have known people who are the last living members of their families and who feel a sorrow and loneliness that makes them wonder if they are alive as they once had been. Others of us might feel half alive if we can no longer remember, or no longer read a book, or do the crossword puzzle or enjoy a favorite food, or when there is absolutely nothing left to try. Miller quotes a local professor who told his daughter that death was what happened when he could no longer follow a Red Sox game. I assume this is a shorthand for saying, death is when I can no longer connect with what I valued in the world around me.

How we define the end of life expresses what we most hold dear and may be more meaningful than the absence of brain activity or a pulse.

What science teaches is that there is one thing that death is not: death is not obliteration. Nothing, not matter and not energy, ever disappears. Everything is connected and everything is transformed. A terminal illness is just that, coming to a terminal, a place where you change trains. My friend Rabbi Devorah Bartnoff, who died of cancer as a young mother,

told her family that just as a terminal is a place where you change trains and move on, so too is death. It is terminal, not the end, but a place and time of transition.

The mystery and profundity of death, nevertheless commands our respect and the importance of honoring each life as if it were the whole world. On Rosh Hashanah, I mentioned how important I thought it was during the inauguration of President Biden when he and Vice President Harris recalled the lives lost under COVID and led us in a national moment of reflection. Part of moving forward is recalling our losses and not passing them by as we rush to celebrate the vaccine and gradual reopening of schools, workplaces, and synagogues. We must take stock. The loss of millions of lives world-wide and over 650,000 lives in the United States alone, a number that grows larger every day, demands our attention.

I want to close this introduction to our Yizkor service of memory 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, value the connections between the living and the dead.

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 כנפי 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,

Put an end to this pandemic,

And all illness and disease.

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? Our task is to 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 shabbat regulars, generous business owners and communal leaders, and a survivor of oppression under Nazi and Soviet governments who served as a living reminder of the losses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each of them left a mark and are well remembered today. At B'nai Tikvah, we remember

Faivish Shavlov

David Romsey

Leon Weiner

Leonard Simon

Edward Shoenig

Maurice Weiner

Edwin Misiph

And Lenore Feierstein.

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.

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