

LIVING A LIFE OF MEANING

YOM KIPPUR 5780

October 9, 2019

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We just read the Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, from the Book of Deuteronomy. It is one of the very last chapters of the Torah. We are nearing Moses' death, and this is his final speech to the people he has led for the last 40 years. This is Moses' last testament to his people.

It is the end of Moses' life. Soon he will die. It is a central teaching of Jewish tradition that Moses dies. He's human. He's mortal, just like all of us.

"So Moses, the servant of the Eternal, died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Eternal. And Moses was buried there, in the land of Moab...and no one knows his burial place to this day."

So ended Moses' life. He is buried in anonymity. The details of the burial are left out of the story, so the Rabbinic Midrash tries to fill in the blanks. The Rabbis imagined that Moses pleads with God to let him live just a bit longer. He begs for more time, if only as just a beast of the field or even a bird of the sky. But God says no. God will hear no more of Moses' pleading.

Let me add a bit to the Midrash. Moses asks, "This is it? Is this all? After all this work and devotion, 40 years of devoted leadership, I am just supposed to wander off and bury myself? Will there be no retirement banquet? Perhaps a roast? A party of some sort?"

Maybe we could have some balloons and cake. Don't I deserve a gold watch? Even a plaque? Nothing?"

Moses is crestfallen. He thinks to himself, "Maybe my life really didn't matter after all. I'll be forgotten. There will be no tomb or monument, no marble crypt or sarcophagus. After all this effort, it's anonymity. I feel like a failure."

This scene reminded me of a scene in an article in the July issue of *The Atlantic Magazine* by Arthur Brooks, entitled "Your Professional Decline is coming (much) sooner than you think." Some of you have read it. There was a link to it in last week's Weekend Happenings, and we will continue to make it available on our website. [\[Click here.\]](#)

The article begins with a scene on a darkened plane; Brooks is traveling from the West Coast to DC. He cannot help but overhear the conversation in the row behind him.

"It's not true that no one needs you anymore." "These words came from an elderly woman sitting behind me on a late-night flight from Los Angeles to Washington, DC...A man I assumed to be her husband murmured almost inaudibly in response,'I wish I was dead.' Again, the woman: "Oh, stop saying that."

Brooks kept listening to this conversation of despair. He imagined an elderly man of some obscurity who had lived something of an unfulfilled life, regretting opportunities missed, dreams unrealized. At the end of the flight, the lights were switched on, Brooks looked behind him and was shocked. He

recognized the gentleman as “a world-famous, beloved hero for his courage, patriotism, and accomplishments.” As this man walked up the aisle, fellow passengers greeted him with veneration. Even the pilot stopped him and said: “Sir, I have admired you since I was a little boy.” Brooks goes on: “The older man—apparently wishing for death just a few minutes earlier—beamed with pride at the recognition of his past glories.”

The older man could be Moses, looking back on his life and wondering if he mattered at all. He could be Moses, or he might be any of us, at some point in our lives.

When Moses nears the end, he begins to feel sorry for himself. He begs God for just a bit more time—only if as a bird. He doubts that his life had really mattered, or that he will ever be remembered.

At that point, God snaps Her fingers—if you will—and Moses is transported a couple of thousand years into the future, into the early 2nd Century. He finds himself in the study house—Yeshiva—of Rabbi Akiba. The great mystical rabbi is expounding on some obscure meaning of the crowns on the letters of the Torah. He is teaching his students the secrets of the hidden, esoteric, arcane interpretations to be found in these strange symbols.

Moses is sitting in the back of the study hall listening to this lesson, and he doesn’t understand a word of the discussion. Then a student asks Rabbi Akiba:

“How do you know this?” Akiba answers: “This is the teaching that has come down to us from Moses our teacher—Moshe Rabbeinu.”

Moses realizes that in fact he is remembered. Down the centuries he has been venerated. We are now nearly 2,000 years after Akiba, and we still invoke his name.

Even more, we remember and honor Moses. Moses’ fear of obscurity and being forgotten was unfounded. He was now ready to die. God is said to have taken his breath away with a gentle loving kiss.

Let’s return to the morose elderly gentleman from Arthur Brooks’ plane ride. Now that he has aged, he is unhappy. But is that the inevitable cost of aging and slowing down? Arthur Brooks points out that most people’s contentment increases in their 50’s and into their 70’s and often well beyond. He asks, “What drives unhappiness?” The answer: “Irrelevance.”

The antidote to the depression of aging is feeling useful and needed. But the happiness of satisfaction also comes from realizing and accepting the different stages of our lives, from youth to maturity, even to becoming elderly. At these various stages and times, there is the need to redesign and redefine our lives. We are forced to reassess our goals and purposes.

When we are younger, the goal is often accumulation, not just material goods and things but also the accumulation of knowledge and skills. We need to get better at our tasks. It is a time to learn how to function and gain expertise. It is also the age when we often devote ourselves to the accumulation of material security, our homes and savings, as it should be. We build relationships. Those are important and vital tasks

But as we age, our goals should change. Brooks discusses the difference between fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence is the ability to reason, analyze, and solve problems.

It is raw intelligence. If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that most of us are better at that when we are young. Ask the hipsters in Silicon Valley.

But crystalized intelligence is the ability to synthesize, use and apply the knowledge gained in the past and to develop wisdom. We move from innovator to instructor, from acquisition to transmission. One of the great gifts of aging and maturing is the increased capacity to teach and mentor, to guide others. We can impart the accumulated wisdom developed over the years of experience, and we need to fully appreciate the value of that skill.

The depressed husband on Arthur Brooks' plane was not satisfied with the elder statesman role—or at least he said so in the privacy of a conversation with his wife. I am not suggesting being in denial about the negative effects on us due to aging. There are indeed significant changes physically, emotionally, and psychologically. But Brooks says: "Decline is inevitable, but misery is not."

It requires us to assess our priorities and recognize what really matters. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, wrote:

"Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power...Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter."

Rabbi Kushner could have been quoting from Psalm 90: "So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

Wisdom is a gift developed over time. And the experiences and meaning of life can be richer and deeper. Here is the lesson of Yom Kippur. Forget the sin, guilt, atonement part and think of the larger picture. I have taught this before, and Rabbi Daniels spoke of this understanding last night. Yom Kippur is the unearthly day. It is the living in heaven day. We are standing before the heavenly court. It is the day of preparation and rehearsal or our final day.

Traditionally, one dresses all in white, even wearing the kittle or burial shroud.

The empty Ark of last night, with the Torahs, the Trees of Life, removed, leaves us with a casket. We fast not in order to afflict ourselves but because we are in a heavenly state and angels don't need food or drink. We remove ourselves from vanity and physical pleasure.

So this is what it will be in the end, when you and I are Moses on Mt. Nebo. It is that inevitable moment we will share because we are, in fact, like Moses, mortal. Rabbi Kushner writes:

"I believe it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days with the sense that we were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for."

I don't think any of us wants to be that man on the plane complaining "no one needs us anymore." Or that "We wish we were dead." The answer is living lives of meaning. Having acquired knowledge, skill, and wisdom, now we go about the task of distributing it, just as we might hope to pass on our financial success or security to others.

We should nurture our ethics and values developed over our years, knowing that our lives have had an impact on those we care about. We hope and pray that the memory we leave behind will be sweet.

David Brooks—not Arthur—had a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece entitled, “Resume Virtues and Eulogy Virtues.” Resume virtues are professional accomplishments and successes. We certainly spend most of our younger lives trying to build up our personal resumes, as well we should. There is great satisfaction in having an impressive resume listing our achievements, recognitions, and victories.

Eulogy virtues are different, however. They are ethical and spiritual. They are what you want people to say about you at your funeral and at *shiva*, even on a *yahrzeit* anniversary. David Brooks makes the point that that we live the most fulfilling lives by pursuing the virtues that have lasting meaning and impact

So Yom Kippur is a day to put our lives in balance. We are taught to imagine this is our last day on earth and ask ourselves can we be satisfied with the life we created? We are given the gift of 25 hours to assess our lives, to stop for a day. This is a retreat, a Sabbath of Sabbaths so that we can be renewed and refreshed.

Later this afternoon, at *Ne'ilah*, as the sun begins to set, the Gates of Heaven will remain open. These are the gates of repentance and reflection. And we will leave the sanctuary and return to our own homes. Let us carry with us positive feelings of hope and promise for a New Year, committed to deepening the experience of our lives, finding additional meaning, and nurturing our relationships. Let us recognize the happiness that comes from feelings of fulfillment, purpose, and relevance. We will know that our lives matter, and our work of living has significance.

In the words of the Psalmist: “So teach us to number our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom”

May this New Year be one of satisfaction, well-being, fulfillment, health, joy, and blessing. Shana Tovah!

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