"Some Hopeful Perspectives on Death"

By Rabbi Henry A. Zoob

As a child I was shielded from everything having to do with death. One summer, when I was about eleven years old attending overnight camp in Maine, my paternal grandmother, Lena Zoob died. She was the eldest in a family of thirteen. My parents in Philadelphia thought it best not to interrupt my summer at camp, so they didn't tell me that she had died until I returned home at the end of August. And even then, I learned nothing about her final days, nothing about her funeral and nothing about how my parents felt about her death. I have to admit, as an eleven year old I was relieved that I didn't have to deal with the death of my grandmother head on, but I was also upset. Was I supposed to forget about my relationship with her, a woman of great strength and a fantastic dry wit? Didn't my parents have enough faith in my emotional maturity to at least talk with me about her death? In retrospect, I can only conclude that they were very uncomfortable talking about death. For them, death was viewed as an unpleasant interruption in life and certainly not something to dwell on, especially with children. It will happen, but until then, don't mention it, in fact, don't even think about it.

Atul Gawande in his best seller *Being Mortal* writes of his experience as a young doctor when he observed that the American medical profession is frequently blind to the possibility of helping the elderly come to terms with the truth that medicine can't conquer death. Gawande argues that quite often those elderly who are clearly close to death don't need physicians to come up with extraordinary measures to prolong their lives, rather they need doctors who will help them come to terms with their mortality and provide a way for them to die with a minimum of pain and a maximum of love and understanding. Hospice is a relatively new institution that helps make the process of dying less frightening by providing human company and the alleviation of pain to the dying so that they are enabled to look upon death not

as an alien visitor, but as the final chapter of their lives and thereby possibly embrace death as they have embraced life. While I find that many are aware of Hospice, its presence has not eliminated the American avoidance of the subject of death. My colleague and friend, Rabbi Dov Taylor, a student rabbi at Beth David in the 60s writes, "Everyone of us will die, and to prepare for our death we need to know that death is part of life and that life and death are brothers."

Naturally, we are loathe to confront the pain that comes with the death of loved ones. Add to this, the frightening feelings around our own mortality, dealing with death can open up a Pandora's box of threatening emotions. Our avoidance of death, may also arise because we live in a culture that glorifies youth, so that we skirt the topic of death by busying ourselves with every kind of youthful activity we can, until the inevitable reality of our death is staring us in the face. Another factor may be that most of us will die in hospitals which tends to isolate our death from our family. A century or so ago, a majority of Americans died at home surrounded by one's entire family, including children and grandchildren which helped to normalize the act of dying as an accepted fact of life. In the final analysis, it could also be that we fear the possibility that when we die, we may be entering into a realm of nothingness. We fear that once there is no one left on earth who remembers us, our personhood will follow in the same path. Like all human beings, we carry within a hope for immortality. But in the presence of death we ask, "Can it be that all of our striving in this world to leave a positive mark and to build families and communities of love comes to nothing? Is each one of us like a guttering candle, a sputtering char, a fading ember that with our death will be extinguished forever?"

My mother who lived to the age of 103 came from a long-lived family of six children. The two siblings who smoked died in their eighties, but my Uncle Bob, Philip Roth's homeroom teacher and friend in Newark, lived to 105. My Aunt Ida died at 99. My mother said "Well of course, she didn't take care of herself." Despite

the record of longevity on my mother's side, now that I'm eighty-three I find myself thinking more and more about my death and my funeral. I would be lying if I said death does not make me anxious. And the thought of my bodily remains in a cold dark grave is especially unsettling. I often wonder when will I die? Will I live long enough to enjoy the Bat Mitzvah of my nine year old granddaughter Lexi and the Bar Mitzvah of my seven year old grandson, Jordan?

As an important aside, I hope all of you have a health care proxy designating the person whom you want to make decisions for you should you be unable to do that yourself when you are nearing death. You should also have a living will, a letter or statement which gives the members of your family instructions as to what medical measures should be taken or not taken when you are nearing death and what other things you would like to be done at that time. A Jewish tradition which might be of interest to you is an Ethical Will in which a parent, before he or she dies, writes a letter to his or her children about the values that they have held precious in their life, what they have appreciated about their children, and what they hope will be their children's guiding principles in the future. The Ethical Will is to be opened after the parent dies.

Whether you are anxious about your own death, or whether you feel the pain of having recently lost a spouse, a child, a beloved sibling or a close friend, death can be a difficult topic to discuss. I believe, however, that like so many life challenges, it's better to talk about death than avoid doing so. Moreover, I would maintain that there are positive things to glean from such a discussion.

The most significant biblical text that deals with death is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Christianity and the majority of Jewish sages look at the Garden of Eden story as the fall of man, man's initial sin, with death as the wages of that sin; a few other Jewish thinkers however, including my beloved teacher Rabbi Chanan Brichto, zichrono livracha, may his memory be for a blessing, propose

that the Eden story is not about the fall of man but just the opposite, man's ascent. I find myself in agreement with this position.

After God creates Eve from the rib or side of Adam, the couple can be compared to toddlers. They are naked but they are totally unaware of their nakedness, just like little boys and girls may be naked together in a tub or at a beach and think nothing of it. God asks them to observe just one commandment. "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat of it, for as soon as you eat of it, you are destined to die." Being curious toddlers, Eve and Adam naturally choose to disobey God and eat from the Tree of Knowledge. I like to think that God knew this would happen, just like a mother who tells her children not to eat the cookies she has just baked but leaves them within reach. As soon as Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they become aware that they are naked and sew fig leaves to cover their private parts. And so, with one bite of the forbidden fruit, they have been transformed from toddlers to adolescents. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge results in their first step towards civilized life, a life which includes clothes, work, sex, children and of course death. That the forbidden tree is called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, has nothing to do with morality. Good and Bad is a merism. A merism is a phrase in which a combination of two contrasting parts of a whole, such as alpha to omega, or soup to nuts, refers to the entirety of something else. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, then, is a tree which imparts to Adam and Eve the knowledge of all the things that make up life as we know it including death. If Adam and Eve had not eaten from the Tree of Knowledge they could have gone on as young innocents eating forever from the Tree of Life, which is clearly the Tree of Immortality. But having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, God expels them from the Garden for they are not allowed to be the beneficiaries of the fruit of both trees – immortal life from the Tree of Life and an awareness of the nature

of human life from the Tree of Knowledge, a state of being that might rival God and the angels. Their banishment from Eden may seem like a punishment, but I view it as a liberating moment when they are freed to live adult lives in the wonderful but challenging world God has created for us.

Ultimately, I think the Adam and Eve myth is asking us a basic question. Would we prefer to live as immortal toddlers unaware of sex, work, and death, or would we choose to live with all the aspects of civilized life that we know of, including death? I don't know about you, but I would not hesitate to choose life with death as we know it rather than life as an immortal toddler in the Garden of Eden, which I would classify as a Fool's Paradise. Furthermore, I would not even want to live forever in this world as a knowledgeable adult, for the world does not have room for the continued existence of generation upon generation of human beings. What would we do with the immortals of 120, 300 or worse yet 500 years? They would quickly become obsolete and each new generation would no doubt resent the presence of their predecessors. It is therefore clear to me that God has created us so that each generation has a chance to have their day in the sun and contribute to making the world a better place for humanity and the animals who share this planet with us. When that day comes to an end, it is not only right, it is necessary that we make way for the next generation. God manages this changing of the guard by means of the divine blessing of death.

An important implication of the emergence of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden may be that the only significant life that we will have is the one on earth, and it is up to us to enjoy its pleasures, endure its trials and find meaning until our mortal lives are over. Moreover, without death, there is no urgency to life. The knowledge that we have a limited time on earth compels us to try to live as full a life as we can in the years that we have. In this sense our death carries with it a positive imperative, for it motivates us to search for love, joy, friendship, meaning,

community and goodness - all the things that make life wonderful. This is what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, “teach us to number our days, so that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12)

When we look elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible there are only a few references to life after death. For example, King Saul disturbs the prophet Samuel from his eternal resting place in *She’ol* to ask the prophet what should he do as the Philistines close in on him. *She’ol* seems similar to the underground domain of Hades in Greek mythology where souls wander about aimlessly in a dark underworld. The three patriarchs in Genesis, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as Aaron and Moses are all said upon their deaths to have been gathered to their people, perhaps a reference to a familial kind of immortality. Only in Daniel, a very late book in the Hebrew Bible, do we encounter a clear reference to the final judgment and a world to come. There we read that there will come a time when the exiled Jews will be rescued and returned to their land, and “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.” (Dan 12:2) And so in the Hebrew Bible we find a small scattering of differing views about life after death, but it is by no means a major motif. Moreover, it is clear that no biblical hero talks about life after death as an aspiration. The Hebrew bible is concerned with life. This is in stark contrast to the preoccupation with life after death in ancient Egypt.

The Hebrew Bible, of course, is not the last word in the four thousand year history of the Jewish people. One of the most significant developments that took place in Jewish thought, around the time of the birth of Christianity, was an ardent belief in the survival of the soul in what the Rabbis call *Olam HaBa* “the world to come.” The Hebrew word for soul *n’shamah* enters Judaism at this time and survives to this day. Every day traditional Jews pray “O God, the *n’shamah* the soul that you have given me is pure, you created it, you shaped it, you breathed it into me. You preserve it within me and You will surely take it from me (when I die) to be restored to me in the *Olam HaBa* the world to come.” The expectation of every Orthodox Jew and many other Jews is that the vast majority of human beings, both Jewish and non-Jewish, will find peace and joy with God in the world to come. What will that be like? Some sages suggest we will get to study Torah with *Moshe Rabeinu*,

Moses our Teacher. I like to think it will be like a beautiful Sabbath dinner with delicious chicken soup, singing around the table, wonderful companionship and the *Sh'chinah* God's embracing presence at the head of the table.

Why at this pivotal juncture in history, the beginning of both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, did Judaism adopt the idea of the immortal soul and Christianity make it a basic tenet of faith? I think it was the influence of Hellenism. In Greek thought there is a distinct separation between the spiritual and the material, the soul and the body. In Socrates and Plato the spiritual dimension of a human being was looked upon as an immortal treasure, the source of a person's morality, while the body was seen as impermanent and inferior. This Hellenistic perspective on the distinction between the spiritual and the material, the soul and the body was adopted by the early Rabbis in the belief that the soul departs the body at death and ascends to be with God. Despite this belief in the separation between body and soul at death, Judaism never thought of the body as something inferior or bad, rather it was the temple of the soul, and as such, the body needs care and attention. Moreover, for two thousand years traditional Jews have held the belief that in the Messianic age, our body will be reconstituted, resurrected and reunited with our soul. For them, ultimate immortality is the reunion of body and soul.

I confess that my view on what happens after we die keeps evolving. On the one hand, I am comfortable with the idea that arises out of the story of our emergence from the Garden of Eden, that we may have but one life to live which eventually will end in our death as we make way for the next generation. I can honestly declare that were I to die tomorrow, I would be satisfied with the life that God has given me, and I would be content if there was no life beyond the grave. I am sorely troubled however by the realization that so many lives on this planet are filled with sickness, hunger and oppression. If God expects **us** to do justly, then surely we the children of God should expect God to treat us in the same way, if not in this world then hopefully in the world to come. A child who dies from cancer, a youth from Africa, Asia or even our Western Hemisphere who is sold into slavery and lives and dies in cruel bondage, or individuals whose lives are suddenly extinguished by a natural disaster or a virus such as Covid, or those who perish as

collateral damage of warfare including the thousands of adults and children in the Ukraine, how can we say that their lives have been blessed by a just and merciful God? There are those who argue that since the injustices in the world are mostly the fault of human beings, if and when we create a more just and safe world, we won't have any reason to look for healing and justice in the afterlife. I think however that even though we human beings have made tremendous progress in improving the quality of human life, hunger, poverty, sickness, and cruelty will always be part of this world. Even the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy declares "There will always be poor people in the land." (Dt. 15:11) And so, I hold onto the hope that there is some goodness stored up for the unfortunate of this world in a world to come. Although I cannot provide the details of life after death, if God has created and sustains the miraculous and amazing world we live in, God can surely provide blessing for good and righteous human souls in a world to come, especially those whose life, through no fault of their own, has been suddenly cut short or has been mainly misery.

I believe however, that our life on earth, is more than just an anteroom to the world to come. Judaism places a tremendous importance on remembrance, both on a personal and historical level. Let us not forget that Rosh HaShanah is also called Yom HaZikaron the Day of Remembrance. Remembrance imparts a significant dimension to the Jewish view of immortality. I was blessed with rather remarkable parents. My mother was an immigrant from Riga. She came to this country at the age of four in the year 1906 with her mother and two siblings. As a very young woman she worked as a court stenographer using a kind of short hand typewriter to record what went on in the courtroom. From that experience, she was inspired to go to law school. And so without a BA, she studied Law in the evenings at Rutgers. There were only two other women in her class. She became a lawyer in the 20s in a large firm in Newark, and although the senior partners of her

firm initially relegated her to family law, that is adoptions and divorce cases, an area of the law that was thought to be especially appropriate for women lawyers, she demonstrated her competence and served as an arbiter and handled many other kinds of cases as well. She was a dedicated reader throughout her life and an ardent liberal, who took me at the age of nine in 1948 to hear the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace speak at the Capitol in Trenton New Jersey when he ran for President. My father was also a lawyer with a graduate degree in Law from Penn. As a freshman at Penn he wrote the football fight song, Fight on Pennsylvania that is still played today after every Penn touchdown. He successfully lobbied the Pennsylvania Legislature to put aside money to save for posterity the models and the designs of the world renowned architect Louis Kahn who was my father's client. He also solicited Mr. Graham French, a client from the pharmaceutical firm of Smith Kline and French to fund a building for the study of agriculture at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Both of my parents were generous, loving and kind and through the blessing of memory, they still live on in me as I try to carry forward their love of music, literature, liberalism and the Jewish tradition. I hope that I have passed on some of the gifts that they gave me to my son and grandchildren. And just this year, I discovered that my great grandfather, Benjamin Lowenstein, who lived in Riga at the end of the 19th Century was a *sofer* a holy Jew who spent his life preparing and writing Torahs and other sacred Hebrew texts. Now, whenever I read from a Torah scroll, I sense, perhaps the sacred words that I am reading were written by my great-grandfather. And so the gift of memory can overcome the finality of death.

I not only believe that my parents, grandparents and great grandparents have passed something special down to me, I feel that I am the beneficiary of Jewish memories and values going back 4000 years to the time of Abraham, who became a covenantal partner with God in a quest for a world of peace and goodness. This

goal is first articulated in the 12th Chapter of Genesis when God says to Abraham *Vehey B'racha* "Be a blessing," be a moral exemplar, for through you and your descendants "all the families of the earth will be blessed." Later, the Kabbalists or Jewish mystics, called this covenantal mission *Tikkun Olam* the "repair of the world." To be a Jew then means that we are committed to Abraham's mission to serve as a partner with God in His hope for a world of goodness and righteousness. This past year there has been a wonderful example of this divine partnership in our own Beth David Community. The Torah teaches us again and again to be kind to the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. A group of Temple members headed by Mark and Barbara Friedman have done just that, by devoting themselves to help settle a family of four Afghan refugees, Wahidulla Wahidi and his wife Sadiga, and their two sons Abuboka and Abuzar aged 5 and 1. The Committee members include Byrna and David Bornstein, Pat Aaronson, Amy Cook, Sondra Traister, Nancy and Mark Springer, Will Krasnow, Mariel Harlow, Barbara and Don Accetta, Marcia Perna, Cheryl Nagle, Joan Jouzaitis and David Lederer, Wendy Weitzner, Kimberly Chase, Rabbi Micah and Rabbi Karen, and Barbara and myself. I think mentioning each name of the committee members is very appropriate because everyone has made a contribution to our successful efforts. I think it is the best committee I have ever served on. We started by raising $50,000 from you the members of this congregation and some outside supporters, and then went on to find an apartment in Windsor Gardens in Norwood, furnish it with the help of donated furniture from many congregants, facilitated the inclusion of Abuboka the five year old in the Temples pre-school and summer camp program, took Wahidullah the father on weekly shopping trips, enrolled the parents in classes to learn how to speak English, arranged for total medical and dental attention for the family, helped the father find work baking bagels at Spot in Norwood, and countless other supportive activities which continue unto this day. How ironic that even

though thousands of Jews were denied entrance to the United States during the Holocaust, Jews including our own Temple members have been in the forefront of welcoming Afghan refugees to America. There are of course so many ways each of us can partner with God such as being involved in the struggle for climate control, engaging in the battles against racism, gun control, poverty and hunger, supporting the Ukrainian people against the evil acts of Vladimir Putin, sharing life with a marriage partner and raising morally sensitive and responsible Jewish children, all these heroic human endeavors, and many more are an effective response to God's challenge "Can we Jews in conjunction with like-minded Christians, Moslems and peoples throughout the earth, build a world based on kindness and righteousness?" When we die our bodies will disappear, perhaps our souls will be reunited with God, but surely our efforts to do justly, to seek mercy and to walk humbly with our God in this world will live on forever as Jewish contributions to the good of humanity.