

There is nothing like studying in a Beit Midrash-- a place of study. All throughout Yeshiva and rabbinical school I spent hours upon hours studying in this sacred setting. The standard way to learn in a Beit Midrash is through Chevruta- in partnership with another student. I was blessed with great Chevrutas all through my years of full time learning. Chevruta learning begins with one partner reading a sacred text aloud and translating, and the other partner offering their take. Sometimes we would agree, but just as often, we'd find ourselves in opposition about the meaning of the text before us. I can't remember how many times I was absolutely sure I was correct, while my chevruta was equally confident in his reading. We would call over the Rabbi supervising the Beit Midrash to settle the debate. I told him my reading, my chevruta shared his reading, and our teacher would say, "Actually, you're both wrong," But I still think I was right.

When Hillel and Shammai debated every point of Jewish law, a heavenly voice came down and said, *Elu V'Elu Divrei Elohim Chaim* - Hillel's view and Shammai's opposing view are both words of the Living God. I've always appreciated that Judaism is a religion of interpretation and debate. When we come across something that's problematic or challenging, we have tools that allow us to reinterpret and adapt to our age. After the 2nd Temple was destroyed and our ancestors were scattered across the world, Rabbinic Judaism developed on several tracks based on geography - Ashkenazi traditions and interpretations developed in Eastern Europe, which were distinct from the traditions of the Sephardi Jews in Spain, and the traditions of Mizrahi Jews in the Middle and Far East. And even within each of those distinct regions, individual communities found unique ways to interpret and practice,, relying on their local rabbi's nuanced guidance. After the creation of printing press, one might have thought that Judaism would homogenize, and that practices would become standardized. Instead the opposite happened--the enlightenment brought brand new interpretations of Judaism that led us to today's rainbow of Jewish beliefs and practices. Today the Jewish traditions are interpreted and practiced differently by communities who identify as Orthodox, Reform and Conservative. But even beyond these most well known denominations, there are communities with rich and diverse interpretations such as Reconstructionist, Renewal, and Secular Humanist Judaism.

Despite the many diverse interpretations of our tradition and practices, there is a danger in thinking that Judaism is "Whatever you want it to be," or simply, "Judaism is just being a good person." The reason these answers are dangerous is that they lack any distinction. Like a cell without walls, A Judaism without any definition or boundaries will eventually cease to be. While Hillel and Shammai both had valid interpretations of the Living God, Jewish law follows Hillel's point of view.

Just as we have to formulate our community around shared values at our center, we must have definition, borders and boundaries.

Al ShlosHa Devarim Ha-Olam Omed - Al HaDin, Al HaEmet V'al HaShalom.¹ The world stands on Judgment, on Truth, and on Peace. I shared this Mishna with you yesterday, as a formula for how we can maintain our community. While these three concepts are broad ideas and may have universal appeal, they are not abstract nor are they lacking in content.

Today I want to focus in on Din- Judgment. Judgment is by its very nature about the need to make a decision. Sometimes we talk about this idea in terms of either/or as opposed to both/and. We encounter the experience of dichotomy in the world every day. **Either** you are a democrat **or** a republican. **Either** you think nobody should have a gun **or** that everybody should. **Either** you support Israel **or** you support its enemies. All of these are false dichotomies, false choices. The danger in this type of thinking is that we miss valid options that are available to us, including the middle ground that I most frequently find as the decisions that I make. For example, it is possible to both support Israel and support peace with Palestinians. It is possible to own a gun and believe that there gun reform is needed in our country.. It is possible to support some democratic ideas and policy proposals, and also support other republican policies and ideas.

Either/Or thinking can sometimes drive harsh divisions, and close off possibilities for compromise. The flipside to this though is that either/or thinking can also lead to clarity and confidence in decision making. When we go to polls, we actually do have to make a choice, either we vote for one candidate or the other. Judges have are required to make either/or judgements every day in the pursuit of justice.

During this time of the Jewish year we call upon God to be an either/or judge. Even though I prefer to function in the world of both/and most of the time, there are times to be challenged by and even to embrace the type of clarity found in either/or thinking. This is one of those times to contemplate a crystal clear either/or for Judaism. One of the names names of this holiday is *Yom Ha-Din*, The Judgment Day. This is the day we stand before God and ask God to write us in the book of life. At the holiday, we imagine ourselves judged, and we believe that in the coming year we will be in the book of life. There is no in-between, either we are in the book of life, or we are not.

On the one hand, it's not surprising that the Jewish tradition emphasized the line between life and death as an absolute, but our tradition could have gone in a different direction. In Deuteronomy, when Moses is sharing his words about how we are to live in the land as God's people, he urges us to not consult familiar spirits...the nations you are about to dispossess do indeed resort to soothsayers and augurs, however, the Lord your God has not assigned you the like. Instead, "The Lord will raise up from you a prophet from your own people." In other words, other nations at the time when Judaism was developing did not have as strict of a

¹ Pirkei Avot 1:18

boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead, but we do. Other nations place great emphasis on the afterlife, but we place our emphasis on life.

With all our emphasis on life, it sometimes might seem that Jews don't really think about death, or afterlife. You've probably never heard a sermon about how to get into heaven or avoid hell. You've probably never focused in this setting on the end of life with great consciousness, because generally in Jewish tradition we focus on how to live, not how we die or what happens after that. Yet, the symbols of death are all around us at this time in the Jewish year. We wear these white garments called Kittles to remind us of *Tachrichin*, the burial garment. We fast on Yom Kippur because we are denying our bodily needs, getting a bit closer to heaven. Our High Holiday liturgy constantly reminds us like no other time of the year. *Mi Yichyeh U'Mi Yamut* - who will live and who will die? *Mi Ba'Esh U'mi ba'mayim* - Who by water and who by fire? *Hayom Yom HaDin* - today is the day of Judgment!

The first time I led High Holiday services, I was a first year Rabbinical student going back to my Alma Mater, the University of Florida. One of my friends who was a younger undergraduate had lost her parents in a car accident that year. She came to me before the service to assure me not be offended when she left early. She said, I just can't be here when we recite "Un'taneh Tokef" I just can't think of God as the One who decides when we leave the world based on our merit. *Mi Yichyeh U'Mi Yamut* - who will live and who will die? *Mi Ba'Esh U'mi ba'mayim* - Who by water and who by fire? I'm not sure there were any words that would have provided comfort at the moment she let me know how much she was suffering. I certainly didn't offer anything more than words of love and understanding that she would have the experience she needed to have on that holiday and that she should hold no fear or worry for any offense I might have taken.

It was the first time the idea of judgment became a direct challenge to my belief. Was there a part of me that believed that God was literally *yoshev al kiseh kvodo*, sitting on God's throne of Glory, and we were passing before God like sheep? Was I imagining that God was actually deciding if I would live or die in the coming year based on whether I was naughty or nice? Could not God both be a judge and not literally decide whether I was going to live or die in the coming year? I wanted a God who was both personal enough to be involved in my life and see my successes and failures, and a God whose judgment did not involve the most ultimate either/or in Judaism.

In a light tone - the words are more than heavy enough It was an otherwise normal Shabbat service at my congregation in St. Louis. I was on the Bima, calling page numbers, praying and singing. All of the sudden, a sharp pain radiated out from my chest on my left side. I began to sweat. I felt a sense of panic, but was not sure what to do. In the front row, was a doctor, and internist who was present every week at services. He wasn't my doctor because the truth was that I felt young and invincible, and just hadn't gotten around to finding myself a doctor I regularly consulted. I really regretted that fact at that moment. At that point in my life I was a lot less healthy and in shape than I am today. The thought ran through my head that if I

wasn't having a heart attack at that moment, I'd probably be having one at some point soon, leading to a premature departure from this world.

After that service, I decided that my doctor friend in the front row would become my doctor. I made an appointment and told him all my concerns. He ran all the tests And thankfully, my heart was just fine. But through the sacred relationship of doctor, patient and friend, I made a commitment to get healthier and over the next year, discovered a love of exercise, and healthier eating, and I am grateful to God every day for my relatively good health.

Never will I forget what it felt like for a moment to truly fear death, and I know that what I experienced was in really insignificant to what so many here today have experienced. How many cancer survivors are here? How many who have survived traumatic accidents? How many who had a heart attack or stroke? How many of us are still struggling and facing a terminal illness, debilitating disease, or a loss of mobility? How many have lost someone before we were ready to say goodbye? I may be healthy today, but none of us know what tomorrow will bring.

Today happens to also be September 11th. Today is the anniversary that all of us in this country felt vulnerable. All of us remember exactly where we were when we first heard that the World Trade Towers had fallen. All of us remember watching them fall over and over again on the news. All of us remember looking to the skies, and fearing what might happen next. All of us who were alive on that day know what it truly is to be afraid.

We learn in a mishna that Rabbi Eliezer says: Repent one day before your death. Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him: But does a person know the day on which he will die? He said to them: All the more so this is a good piece of advice, and one should repent today lest he die tomorrow; and by following this advice one will spend his entire life in a state of repentance. And King Solomon also said in his wisdom: "At all times your clothes should be white, and oil shall not be absent from upon your head" (Ecclesiastes 9:8), meaning that a person always needs to be prepared.²

I'm not prepared to die. I imagine that most of us are not prepared to die. But as our sages teach us, preparing to die any day means that we will live our whole life striving for our best self. So, I'd like for us as a congregation to not fear the work of preparation.

The first step of preparing to die happens here and now, by committing to live every day of our lives striving for our best self. We call that process *teshuva*, or returning. We should also accept that this ideal is practically unattainable, and forgive ourselves for not living up to it. We'll be back here again in need of repentance not only next year, but next month, next week, even tomorrow.

² BT Shabbat 153a

The next step is not putting off the logistical and spiritual work around the end of life. Our culture of life has perhaps inadvertently caused us to fear even talking about death, but we all will die. It's past time for us to make the conversation about the end of life more accessible, and less taboo. To this end, our past president, Denise McLaughlin has organized a series titled "Ready or Not". This series will be an opportunity for us to explore the many facets of preparing for the end of life. We'll cover topics like ethical and financial wills, hospice, having the conversation about your wishes and the wishes of your family members, legacy building, the logistics of funerals, and other topics with experts and practitioners.

READY OR NOT: Jewish Perspectives on End-of-Life Issues (a 7-part series)

10/17/18: Ethical Wills: Getting Your Thoughts on Paper

What are ethical wills, why do they matter, and what is their Jewish connection? Regardless of your age, it is always valuable and meaningful to consider the hopes, ideals, principles, and blessings that you want to leave as a legacy to your loved ones. An ethical will is the way you can do that. This session will get you started on creating yours.

Facilitator: Dr. Ed Queen; Panelists include Natalie Kaiman

11/7/18: Beyond the Paperwork: A Conversation About Estate Planning

Hear practical advice from an expert on the documents that comprise "Estate Planning:" wills, living trusts, advanced directives, "Jewish Health Care Directives," POAs, HCPOAs. What does Judaism teach us about this subject? What is probate—good, bad, avoid? Learn about the Federation's "Life and Legacy Project" and how you can be a part of this critical effort.

Facilitator: Steve Merlin; Panelists include Jake Kaplan and Blair Rothstein

12/12/18: Having the Conversation: What Are Their Wishes? What Are Yours?

The Conversation Project seeks "to have every person's wishes for end-of-life care expressed and respected." Join our facilitators as they present a condensed version of the national program started by writer Ellen Goodman in 2010. Documents, practical tips, and support will be shared as congregants are given the tools to start this project for themselves and their loved ones.

Facilitators: Dr. Marcia Jacobs and Denise McLaughlin

1/16/19: Palliative and Hospice Care: Who, What, When, and Where?

Our expert panel includes a palliative doc, geriatrician, hospice social worker, hospice nurse, and a hospice chaplain who will elaborate on the 4 "W's."

Facilitator: Dr. Sharon Neulinger; Panelists include Dr. Sivan Ben Moshe, Lauren Sherman Chernoff, Jenny Buckley and Cantor Donna Faye Marcus

1/30/19: Ready or Not: Your Changing (and Aging) Family

If we're lucky, we all grow old—now what? How do we cope and help others cope? Our panelists will explore the practical and emotional factors in coping with aging parents and partners, and of course ourselves. Sandwich generation welcome; you will need this info sooner than later!

Facilitators: Dr. Marshall and Sara Duke; Panelists include Elise, Jana and Harlan Eplan, Jeff Kirsh, Rabbi Simer, and Dr. Bruce Rudisch

2/27/19: When Death Visits Our Jewish Community: Everything You Wanted to Know (Or Not), Part 1

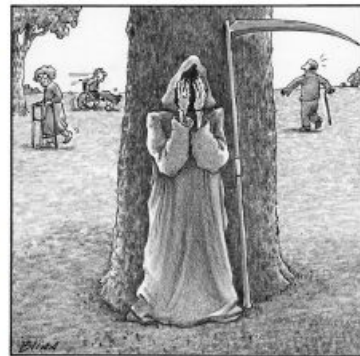
Learn the what and why of the many traditional Jewish practices surrounding death; also, cremation, tissue and organ donation, CSI's cemeteries, how to honor non-Jewish family members, and an overview of funeral home scope of services.

Facilitator: Rabbi Kaiman; Panelists include David Zinner, Eddie Dressler, Harold Koslow

3/13/19: When Death Visits Our Jewish Community: After the Funeral, Now What? Part 2

Learn the what and why of traditional Jewish practices following the funeral: shiva, minyan, shloshim, headstones, and saying Kaddish. How can we support the mourners among us? Personal responses to the loss of a parent or partner will be explored.

Facilitator: Rabbi Kaiman; Panelists include Dr. Bruce Rudisch, Leon Tuck, Leah Harrison



*"... nineteen, twenty. Ready or not,
here I come!"*

When we prepare for the end of life, we are not hastening death, nor valuing death over life. Life and death is either/or, and we value life. When we prepare for death, we emphasize our life even more, and we care for ourselves and the living that will follow us.

When we hear that a person dies, the traditional formula to recite is *Baruch Dayan Ha'emet*. Blessed is the True Judge. I don't know if, like my friend from college, I think of God as the one who decides, either/or, life or death in the coming year. But I do know that *Teshuva*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah ma'avirin et roah ha'gezeirah*. Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Tzedakkah will avert the severity of the Decree, maybe not by changing the future, but possibly by providing us the tools to live our best life. *Teshuva*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah* - These three concepts align nicely with Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chesed. We learn how to follow the best path to Teshuva through the study of Torah, we connect to our highest selves through Tefillah, which is also known as *Avodah*, and Tzedakah, the pursuit of justice is a form of *Gemilut Chasidim*. We cannot know if God is the True Judge who decides when we live and when we die. None of us know when it will be our day of judgment, but may we merit to live our life to the best of our ability, so that when our day finally comes, we leave a legacy of truth in the world.