

Planning for Death and for Life

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At the end of June, earlier this year, I like many of you, became transfixed by the story of the soccer team in Thailand which became lost in a cave. The coach had led the twelve boys, ages 11 – 16, through an intricate series of passages and, after hiking four kilometers into the cave, it began to rain. It rained so hard that the cave filled with water, blocking the way out. It took more than a week for rescuers to locate the team. It took another week to devise a plan to extract each of the boys and their coach. For nearly two weeks the entire team and their coach, had been stuck, with no way out, without food, for over a week.

I have been thinking about that experience and wondering how that experience of being stuck with no food for such a long time, not knowing if they would be found or could be rescued, would impact on the lives of the boys and their coach. How does one process a near-death experience of this sort? How does one live differently following the rescue from such an ordeal?

Tonight is Yom Kippur. Tonight we atone for our misdeeds committed over the past year and ask for another year during which we shall do more and do better. We accomplish this by listing our sins, beating our breasts, confessing, praying and fasting. All of this we do to prepare us to live another year to spur us on as we enter a new year. But there is an irony here. As we plan for life in the new year, we simultaneously prepare for death. You see, the rituals which we follow on Yom Kippur, which are intended to prepare us for a new year of life. But those same rituals are those we perform when a person dies. Allow me to explain:

Vidui/Confessional:

When a person is near death, there is a passage recited which constitutes a confessional/ *viddui* in Hebrew. One acknowledges shortcomings, repents and prays for atonement on one's death bed.

On Yom Kippur, each of the services we recite during this long day of prayer includes a passage known as *viddui*. We beat our breasts as we confess our

sins. We pray for atonement. **Viddui/** The confessional is a ritual for both Yom Kippur and Death.

Sh'ma Yisrael:

The last words a person should say upon their death bed are the words of the *Sh'ma Yisrael*.

The last words of the Yom Kippur services are *Sh'ma Yisrael*.

Tahara/ Purification:

When a person dies, their body is washed or immersed in a Mikveh. "*Tahara/purification*" is the term used for this process.

In ancient times, on Yom Kippur, during the latter part of the day, in the 'Avodah Service, we read of the purification of the Kohen Gadol in ancient times, using the Mikveh to prepare for the Yom Kippur rite.

Today, it is traditional to immerse in a Mikveh prior to Yom Kippur to emphasize the purification we seek.

Wearing White:

Traditionally, a person is buried in *tachrichin*/linen white burial shrouds.

On Yom Kippur, it is also our custom to wear white.

Fasting:

As a person does not eat when they are dead, so too do we not eat during Yom Kippur.

Why are the customs of Yom Kippur connected to our traditions surrounding death? Why is a day of new life connected to our own demise?

We have trouble thinking about death. Of course, if asked whether we think that we will die, the answer, most often will be: Yes, but I don't want to talk about it. But, most of us don't **really** internalize that realization that we will, sooner or later, die. We don't think much about the fact that our lives are finite. Just the opposite!

Most people today see themselves as invincible. Our fascination is with that which is immortal, such as superheroes in movies that are box-office-smashes. Our interests are only secondarily the special effects. Our primary interest is immortality. Most superheroes don't die. And we like that and are drawn to it. We identify with things that are infinite or immortal. The more infinite, the more invincible the superhero, the more appealing.

And so, Yom Kippur comes as a reality check. We are forced to confront, not so much death but the finite nature of our lives. And when we realize the paucity of our years, we are motivated to live our lives with a greater sense of urgency. We are reminded to **do something**. Don't put it off. This, all of this, will not last forever.

There is a part of a verse from The Psalms, Ps. 24, which, when translated literally, makes this point:

asher lo natan la-shav nafshi /

A literal translation would be that:

[God] has not given me my soul in vain/ for nothing.

And here is the story that goes with this verse.

A man meets an old friend on the street. They haven't seen each other in years and they spend a few minutes catching up. And one asks the other:

Listen, I know I've been out of touch but, I am a little short on cash. Could I borrow \$100?

Of course, said the other. After all, what are friends for?

And listen, I should have things worked out in a week, two weeks maximum and I'll return the money to you by then.

The friend runs up to his apartment and writes a check for \$100 payable to his friend. They embrace and part ways.

A week, two weeks, a month...no friend. Long story short, a year goes by and, about that same time as a year ago, the two old friends meet again on the street. They exchange pleasantries and the one says to the other: You know, you borrowed \$100 from me.

On my goodness. I am so sorry. Wait right here and I'll be right back. The friend runs back to his apartment and runs all the way back to his friend waiting on the sidewalk. And the one friend hands the other a check for \$100: the same check which had been written exactly a year ago. Never cashed.

The one says to the other, "You know, you asked me for a loan. I wrote you a check for \$100. I really didn't mind the fact that it took a year for you to pay me back. But what bothers me is that I gave you the money a year ago and you didn't do anything with it"

Asher lo natan la-shav nafshi. This is what God says to us on Yom Kippur:

All right. Last year you asked me for another year. You wanted to keep your soul and live for another year and I said okay. But now, a year later, I must ask: what have you done with that which I gave you a year ago. You know, the soul which you have had for this past year, *asher lo natan la-shav nafshi/* I didn't give you your soul, your life for another year for nothing. I gave you a year so that you could do something. So, what have you done with your soul during the last year? And what do you plan to do with that soul if I renew your prescription?

In this context, I share with you a thought, a thought inspired by two plays I saw during the last year, plays which shared a common theme.

The first was, "Come from Away", the other, "The Band's Visit". "Come from Away" is based on the true story of the town of Gander, Newfoundland, Canada. On September 11, 2001, as the Twin Towers in New York were falling, all flights within the US, or bound for the US were diverted away from American air space. As a result, the little town of Gander became the place to which scores of flights with thousands of passengers were diverted. It would be a week or more until the passengers could get to their destinations.

How could a small town absorb, house, feed and care for so many people over the course of a week or more? The play is masterfully done, the story of the town folks and the grateful passengers was deeply touching. At the end of the play, as the passengers were preparing to leave, after flights were permitted to fly to their destinations, many of the passengers wanted to compensate their hosts. But the

hosts, all of them refused. And the reason they refused was embedded in the play. The actors who played the town's folks were the same actors who played the passengers. As if to say, had the tables been turned, those who had been hosts, at another time, in another context, might just as well have been the guests.

At many points along the way in our lives, we are either givers or takers. If you are fortunate enough to be a giver, remember that, there will come a time when you will need to receive.

"The Band's Visit" is a story based on an honest misunderstanding. A military band from Egypt is invited to Israel to perform. The performance was scheduled to take place in *Petach Tikvah*. But, after arriving in Israel and buying bus tickets to the performance, the Band's leader, who has an accent, purchases bus tickets for himself and the band members. When the Band Leader with an Arabic accent order tickets for *Petach Tikvah*, the ticket agent heard *Beit HaTikvah*. And so, the Band ends up in *Bet HaTikvah*, nowhere near *Petach Tikveh*. With no way to get to their proper destination that day, they are required to stay the night in *Bet HaTikvah*. Once again, the people in the small, fictional Israeli town rise to the occasion, taking in the band members and giving them food and lodging for the night.

In both plays, simple acts of kindness, the willingness to open one's home to a stranger, the instinct to share one's food and one's friendship was deeply felt. The events of each play, were simultaneously mundane and miraculous. I was moved by each play by the generosity of spirit, the sense of care and humanity which the hosts, in each play, shared with their guests. And together, these plays teach profound lessons.

In the year to come, we need not make extraordinary plans, promises or predictions. Simple acts of kindness, simple things like sharing with those in need, offering friendship and a smile to each person, opening your home to those who may need a place to stay, these are the simple and profoundly important acts which each of us can do.

You see, Yom Kippur is about living. Yom Kippur is a happy day because we believe strongly that we **will** be given another year of life. Our question tonight is not **if** we shall live. God willing, we will all be here next year. Same time. Same

place. But when we come back next year, will we be able to say, this year has not been a waste. This year I reached out to someone, I helped, I cared. This year, I made good use of the time allotted to me. *Asher lo natan la-shav nafshi*: I made good use of the time I have been given. I may not have done grandiose and prominent things for which some people are recognized, I did something small. I welcomed. I shared. I cared for. I went a bit out of my way just to assist another.

When those young teens and their coach finally emerged from the cave in Thailand, they were celebrated and feted. The rescue had been costly. Celebrations were muted by the loss of a navy seal who died attempting to rescue the team. But following the experience, I could not help but wonder what the lasting impact of this ordeal would have on the boys and the coach. Now what will they do with their lives, to make use of the gift of life which was nearly taken from them?

This is the question we ask tonight. What shall **we** do, with all of the potential and promise of the new year, with all of the problems and challenges which abound, what shall we do with the gift of another year? Reach out, extend your hand, exchange a smile, open your heart. Open your home. And in doing so, you will not only help another person. You will give yourself a gift, the gift of a year of new life, of a year well-spent.