

**Yom Kippur's Unusual Gifts: Uncertainty and Urgency**  
**Yom Kippur 5781/ September 28, 2020**  
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According to the CDC, among the ancillary effects of COVID 19 is the stress, depression, fear, and anxiety experienced by many, even by those who have not been infected by the virus. This anxiety, I believe, is, in part, the by-product of the heightened level of uncertainty with which we are living, and there are lots of uncertainties everywhere we look.

We remain uncertain about the future:

Will we contract the virus or not?

Even if we remain healthy, what about our family and friends?

What will be the effects of the pandemic on our jobs? What are our plans for the future?

In addition, the unprecedented restrictions placed upon us when we go about our daily lives, leaves us unsettled and overly cautious...and for many, quite anxious.

Uncertainty, although present, at generally lower levels, in our lives during normal times, has been a dominant theme in our lives for the past eight months and our challenge has been coping with it. How do we live and cope with the increasing levels of uncertainty today? This is the question answered by Yom Kippur.

It is the purpose of Yom Kippur to push us to confront the uncertainty of life. In our liturgy, that uncertainty is expressed most directly when we ask:

“Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire? Who by water?”

*(U'netaneh Tokef)*

Knowing that we will die at some point is a certainty. What creates our anxiety and our restlessness is that we do not know how or when. Yom Kippur says it directly:

a bright future is not assured. As they say, past performance is no guarantee of future results. What does the future hold? Health or sickness? Success or Misfortune? Achievement or failure? Life or death?

Will we live out the coming year? Shall we prevail over death for the coming year? If confronted with a life-threatening obstacle, shall we succumb? Shall we survive?

This is the specific kind of anxiety created by Yom Kippur and reflected in the liturgy of this day. But there are echoes of the uncertainty of life, as well, embedded in our Torah reading this morning, as well.

Our Torah reading recounts, most obviously, the Yom Kippur ceremony performed by the *Kohen Gadol* in ancient times. The climax of this ceremony occurred when the *Kohen Gadol* would emerge from the Holy of Holies. His face was radiant and aglow. The spirit of that moment was filled with joy, for when the High priest emerged, the People felt that their atonement had been complete, their *t'shuva*/repentance was sufficient to give them another year of life.

But there is, as well, in our reading, the counterpoint to the ceremony of the High Priest. Preceding this description of the Yom Kippur ritual, we have a quick reference, almost a *non sequitur*, of a personal, private, and unimaginably painful moment for Aaron that seems to have no connection to that which follows. That reference brings with it a reminder of life's precarious nature. It requires that we remember just how vulnerable we are, just how uncertain is our fate, no matter the outcome of the Yom Kippur ritual.

*Acharei mot shnay b'nai Aharon b'korvatam lifnay Adonai vayamutu.*

This is what occurred when two sons of Aaron drew too close to the Presence of God and they died. (Lev. 16)

Before the Yom Kippur ritual, we are reminded of the deaths of two of his sons. Who were these sons? Why and how did they die? How is this relevant? The midrash contains numerous comments and descriptions of this fatal moment. The details here, however, are not crucial. Why the reference to this tragedy, which

happened some time before? What connection does this horrific event have to Yom Kippur? It is, I believe, the specter of the violent death of his sons, brought here to cast its shadow, the shadow of death, upon the Yom Kippur ritual.

Although the High Priest emerges from the Holy of Holies and proclaims that the atonement of the people has been accepted, that specter of death, weighs heavy. We have no assurances that we shall live or die during the coming year. This is what creates our anxiety. This is what fills us with fear. This is life's way of reminding us that that, in life, there are few reasons and no guarantees. This sense of randomness in our lives is ensconced in our prayers. This is why Yom Kippur, in part, becomes a preparation for death.

It is no coincidence that the preparations for this day suggest our dressing in white, in garments reminiscent of traditional burial shrouds.

We do not eat, like those who are dead.

We enter the day in purity, traditionally going to the Mikveh before the onset of the Holiday. Similarly, a body is ritually washed or immersed in a mikveh as part of the preparation for burial.

When someone dies, loved ones may look for reasons. Those reasons are occasionally infuriating:

God needs so-and so more than we did here.

In a phrase borrowed from "Rabbi" Joel (Billy Joel), some misguidedly try to comfort the mourner with: Only the good die young!

Or those who reflect upon a painful death as punishment for some ritual infraction.

But those who seek to explain why a person has died, are simply trying to find reason in the randomness of life, and fortitude to face life's uncertainties.

If I can find a reason, if I can make sense of this death, there is less uncertainty for me to endure. If I can explain the evil and pain which fall upon me, I can endure it.

Explanations restore order and greater certainty to a world of randomness and uncertainty.

On *erev* Rosh HaShana, our country sustained a painful loss in the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. There are, of course, different levels of sadness which this loss has created. There is sadness in her family, sadness among her friends and colleagues, sadness in the camp which was hoping to appoint a Supreme Court Justice after the upcoming elections. For all who feel the pain of this loss, I take this moment to acknowledge and pay respects to the memory of Justice Bader Ginsberg, z”l.

I have been fascinated, however, by the attempts to explain her death. One rabbi suggested that because she died on *erev* Rosh Hashana confirms that she was a *tzaddik* (*tzadeket*), invoking the rather obscure notion that *tzadikim metim b’Elul* / the righteous die in Elul (the month prior to Rosh Hashana). Why? Presumably because, if it had been decreed last year that someone was to die during the coming year, a normal person would die at some unremarkable time. But a *tzaddik* would have the benefit of an entire year before the decree was enforced. In this case, Justice Bader Ginsberg lived until the very last moment of the year.

There is little evidence that this idea is part of normative Jewish thought. There is even less evidence that it is true. I believe that the Justice’s reputation and righteous life, her numerous contributions to our society, to women’s rights and to the Court, would be acknowledged no matter when she died. More importantly, if God extended her life to the very last moment of the year gone by, because she is a *tzaddek*, why not extend her life altogether (at least until after the upcoming elections)? The immediate inclination to associate this teaching with her, teaches us less about Justice Bader Ginsberg, z”l, and more about our need to find comfort

as a beloved jurist and activist has died. We need to confront this death in a way which allows us to resume living.

How we respond to, rationalize, and confront death is the key to understanding Yom Kippur. The key to coping with the uncertainties of life and, ultimately, the key which allows us to move forward in life resides in our ability to see beyond uncertainty. The “*unitaneh tokef*” prayer provides that formula:

*U'Teshuva U'Tefilla U'tzedaka* / Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Kindness soften the decree.

Although we cannot change the world on a large scale, we can do something: we can improve the quality of our lives through repentance (working to become a better person) prayer (finding a way to be closer to God) and Tzedakah, (performing acts of kindness). Will this change the world or the capricious nature of COVID 19? Frankly, no. But Yom Kippur adds depth to our lives, urging that we respond to the world’s randomness with deeds which enlarge the positive impact of our lives, with inner strength drawn from our faith and with acts of kindness which enrich the lives of others. And Yom Kippur teaches us, as well, that we must live our lives with a sense of urgency.

In today’s reading, Aaron watched what was transpiring before him. He rose from his chair and stared with disbelieving eyes, witnessing the horrific incineration of two of his sons. And what did Aaron do? How did he respond? Did he scream with rage? Curse in disbelief? Cry out in pain? No. The Torah records the following word to describe Aaron’s response: *VaYidom*. Aaron restrains himself.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Koszk once said: The cry one holds back is the most powerful of all. That was Aaron’s silent cry. The Yom Kippur rituals were infused with this silence.

And one more point: what do our commentaries do in attempting to explain this horrific event? They look for reasons. They want to explain that, yes this is terrible but **there is** a reason, there are explanations, **we can** make sense out of

this. In fact, they say, we must make sense of it, since without a clear reason, life is too random.

For Aaron, there were no satisfying explanations. Aaron stood in silence, a silence created by the poverty of language to express this pain. He stood in a self-imposed silence in order not to say what his heart wanted to express, overcome with grief. There is too much uncertainty for us to endure. Too much anxiety. And yet, this would be the mood of Yom Kippur. This is life.

Over a decade ago, my son, Yonatan, made aliya and, shortly thereafter, went into the army. He became a *tzanchan*, a paratrooper. He chose that branch of the service not because he liked jumping out of planes (he did not). He chose it because he wanted to fill the place in the army left by a friend of his, Michael Levine, *z"l*, who had been killed in the 2006 War in Lebanon. And, for many years, throughout Yonatan's IDF service, on *Yom HaZikaron*, the day Israelis pay tribute and remember their fallen soldiers, he volunteered to stand at the grave of his friend, as a representative of the army and a gesture of friendship, from one friend to another.

How does one stand at such an occasion? What does one say while standing beside that grave? *Amod dom* means "Attention", in army language. Literally, however, it is translated "Stand Silent". For Yonatan, staring at the final resting place of his friend, standing at attention, was a sign of discipline and control. I believe that his silence contained, as well, anguish and anger and bewilderment that Michael was killed while the soldier next to him was unharmed. His silence, like Aarons, was a cry restrained, the most powerful cry, as stated by Rabbi Menachem Mendel. The first way to respond to the pain caused by a tragic and unexpected death is silence. Silence is Yom Kippur's first response.

A couple of years ago, I saw a story in the New York Times (Aug. 4, 2017, p. A4). The article described an unusual tradition enacted in only one place, the small town

of Santa Marta, Spain. Each year, on July 29, an extraordinary ritual is performed. This year, the ritual began inside a small church, as Pilar Dominguez Munos adjusted her dress, put on her sunglasses, and stepped into her coffin. Her daughter, Uxia, watched anxiously as pall bearers hoisted her mother onto their shoulders and carried the casket, parading through the street behind the sound of a brass band. Pilar, of course, was perfectly alive, as was her daughter, Uxia, which was exactly the point.

Uxia, you see, had a rare medical condition called osteogenesis imperfecta, otherwise known as brittle-bone disease. She had suffered, for many years, with this disease. But when Uxia broke both ankles and was confined to a wheelchair, Pilar thought of this ritual. For some this ritual is an enactment (or “pre-enactment”) of one’s own funeral.

For Pilar and Uxia, however, the meaning was much different. She believed that this ritual should be performed by someone after they have witnessed the near-death of a loved one. This ritual demonstrated that death had her in its grip, but she was able to break out, to leave the casket, to prevail over death. Without saying the words, this ritual articulates the second reminder regarding death: In a world in which there is so much uncertainty, we can confront death and prevail. Yes, life is uncertain and unpredictable, but we are not fatalists who believe that we have no control over the courses of our lives. We are not powerless. We can face death and, on occasion, we can prevail. Beyond silence, our second response to death is direct confrontation and, ultimately, overcoming death in that moment.

A third way to confront death comes from a young man named Chris. Chris was a patient of Dr. Fred Epstein, a world renown doctor and writer. He directs the program in pediatric neurosurgery at Beth Israel Hospital in New York, working with the sickest children who often need surgery to remove malignant tumors. As a result, Dr. Epstein, over the years came to understand the need for a variety of approaches in treating cancer in children. He often learned from other doctors about different approaches for treatment. This time, he learned from one of his

patients. Chris, Dr. Epstein's patient, changed the way Dr. Epstein approached other terminally ill patients, helping them confront their own imminent deaths.

Chris had been fighting a particularly rare and terribly aggressive form of cancer. He had been hospitalized more times than he or Dr. Epstein, could count. Chris had undergone numerous surgeries and various rounds of treatments. After being admitted again, Dr. Epstein realized that, for the first time, he could not find a sentence beginning with the words, "Let's try something else", a new protocol, a new surgery, a new combination of drugs. There was nothing else. This was particularly devastating for Dr. Epstein since, over the many years he had treated Chris, he had grown fond of him, admiring the young man as a patient, as a fighter and as a lovely and gentle personality.

Chris often wrote poetry to express his thoughts and feelings. Normally when Dr. Epstein came to his room, Chris would be writing. Not this time. Chris was too weak to hold a pencil. He could only smile, and, after a short examination, Dr. Epstein got up to leave, saying that he would see Chris tomorrow.

When Dr. Epstein came the next day, the room was empty. Chris had expired during the night. But there, on the windowsill, was an envelope on which was written, "Dr. Epstein". When he opened it, he saw the writing and knew that it was a poem for him from Chris. Here is the poem:

*I have for many useless hours contemplated eternity  
I have prayed in the night  
By the cold and lonely side of my bed  
For the peace and strength of our living God  
And I still wonder: Will I be saved?  
I wait with hope in my heart  
  
I am struggling, O Lord to stay alive  
I am losing my sacred strength  
I am living a life of confusion*



*And death is very near  
I ask you reader, whoever you may be  
Take my trembling hand and warm it with care and sympathy  
I believe that love is the sole purpose of man's life  
And, without love, life is sterile and without meaning  
But with love, life has wonder  
With love life has color and beauty*

“I ask you reader, whoever you may be, take my trembling hand and warm it with care and sympathy”. This line was the most powerful for Dr. Epstein. It taught him, in a single line, a priceless lesson:

I may not be cured. I may die soon, but life is not simply about longevity. Confronting death is not always about living longer. You see, our lives are uncertain. We live with uncertainty, not knowing for sure if today I will die.

Chris was trying to say that living need not be that which is synonymous with not dying. As Chris showed Dr. Epstein, we can confront and deny death in each moment by sharing love, by simply holding warmly an outstretched hand. By sharing our concern, sympathy, and kindness with another human being, one's life becomes full. For that moment, we confront and defeat death.

We live in a moment in which the uncertainty of COVID 19 affects us in our private lives, in our lives as Americans and as citizens of the world. We mourn today the 200,000 deaths in this country due to COVID, over 1 million throughout the world. We have learned to mourn on a grand scale. But we have learned, as well, strategies to help us to cope, to defuse our anxiety, confront and to persevere.

A small town in Spain endures by enacting their own brushes with death without succumbing. In a cemetery in Israel, silence is the response. And there are those who look death in the eyes and refuse to be defeated, who commit to find love and kindness as a counterweight to death.

I would like, however, to conclude with a final lesson: Uncertainty is a product of not knowing when we shall die. As frightening and, for some, paralyzing as is uncertainty, randomness and uncertainty can also be gifts. Uncertainty and the randomness of life remind us that we must live life fully and with a sense of urgency, for who knows how long we have left to complete the work we have started? We had better do it now.

The *Midrash* teaches a similar lesson:

If God did not conceal from each person the day of his death, no one would build a house or plant a vineyard; each person would think:

Tomorrow I will die. Why should I work for the benefit of others?

Thus, God conceals the day of a person's death so that she will build and plant. (*Yalkut Shimoni* on *Kohelet*, #968)

On this holiest day of the year I do not have a single answer or response to the uncertainties of the lives we are living today. But I believe that within uncertainty is voice which says, "This will not last forever".

In the meantime, our charge, is to live with urgency and resolve. Our mandate is to endure. But our responsibility at this moment is to care for one another, helping each other by reaching out and warming the hand of the other. And we must do so now. Today / *HaYom*, for who knows what tomorrow may bring.

In the uncertainty which pervades our lives today, I remind you that we can endure with strength and urgency. If we can hold and warm the hand of another, we can prevail over uncertainty. This must be our belief, our response, our comfort.