

This past year, especially this past summer, we have experienced too many tragic funerals of people who were unusually young and people who had made a significant impact on the life of their community.

At most of these funeral, I had the opportunity to sit and listen to the words of a rabbi other than myself, family members, and friends. As they were speaking their marvelous words vividly describing the values, kindness, and beauty of the life of the deceased, I found my mind, each time, wandering to the same thoughts.

I pictured myself lying in the plain pine box at the front of the sanctuary. Sitting in the front row are my four children and their spouses, my 8 grandchildren and several of their spouses, and my 6 great-grandchildren.

I wonder what kind of words will be said about me. What will my children say, if any of them choose to speak? What will the rabbi say, after gathering together the whole family and spending part of an evening reminiscing about my life? Will I have made an impact that comes even close to that of Perry Werchowsky, Bernard Stern, Reva Garvin, or Marv Hammerman; of Phil Loby, Dora and Leonard Rosensweig, or Melvin Rashewsky?

Today, on Yom Kippur, these thoughts are precisely what we should all be pondering. After all, why do we fast on Yom Kippur? Most assuredly not because we are downcast by our burden of sin, throwing ourselves at God like a starving person at a plate of food! No, we wear white, the color of purity and freedom from sin! We sing melodies that are majestic, not mournful; We read words of surety, not hopelessness; we have the hutzpah to pray to God with the conviction and strength of angelic beings, not the uncertainty and tentativeness of imperfect mortal beings!

We fast because we stand before God as semi-divine beings who have no need of nourishment!

We fast because we look our own mortality in the face and say, "I can be better than I am right now!"

We fast because we, unique among all of the living beings on earth, have the presence of mind and intellect to look God in the face, as it were, and say, Barukh ATA Adonai, Blessed are YOU, Adonai, the source of Blessing are YOU, Adonai. Visitors to medieval royalty would never dare to address the king in the second person. They would say, "Your Royal Highness" or "Her Majesty the Queen" We have the audacity to speak to God almost as an equal!

Nevertheless, those who are fasting, either totally or partially, sit here feeling the humanness of our bodies more intensely than usual, because our bodies do expect to be fed, and our bodies are beginning to complain. Even those who are not fasting are certainly feeling the urgency of being here in this room for these several hours, engaged in intense prayer and introspection. And this does funnel our thoughts towards thoughts of our mortality, and that is one of the reasons that we recite the Yizkor memorial service today.

It is one thing to imagine what will people say at your funeral some years down the line. It is another thing entirely to imagine what people would say if TODAY were your funeral, for if there is one thing we have learned in the past two week, it is that not a single person here, young or old, can guarantee that life will continue beyond this instantaneous moment in which we find ourselves right now.

Rabbi Eliezer taught in Pirke Avot (2:10), "Do teshuvah, repent, one day before you die." His students asked him (Avot D'Rabbi Natan 16:4), "How does one know on which day one will die, in order to do teshuvah?" He responded, "Aha! So do teshuvah every day, lest you die the following day!"

The question of the day, therefore, is what can you do in this moment that will change the course of the rest of your life. The laws of physics teach us that an object will tend to keep moving in a straight line unless another force acts upon it. This is called momentum, and too often our lives are led in a straight line, and only aging and death can cause us to stop traveling along that single-minded path. The hardest thing in the world to do is to bring force to bear on our lives and turn ourselves in a different direction. This is teshuvah. Turning.

As a motivational tool, I am going to suggest that you take the opportunity during the Yizkor service to imagine yourself at your own funeral, and choose just one anecdote that you would like to hear told about yourself about your involvement with one simple mitzvah, or one desirable character trait, and I want you to resolve to go out and do that one mitzvah or work on that character trait every day with passion and commitment.

The people whose names I mentioned earlier are powerful examples to look towards for examples of how to live a life. We can strive to be as passionate about Jewish cultural events as Leonard Rosenzweig, or about art and theater and music as Dora Rosenzweig; we can aspire to be as good of a teacher as Phil Loby, or as prominent in our profession as Bernard Stern was in his; we can try to be as good at connecting with the unique history and features of various cities across America as Reva Garvin, or as good of a friend as Melvin Rashewsky.

During this exercise you might be likely to ask yourself: “Can I measure up against the giants of our community, of our congregation, or even of my own family? Am I capable of being the kind of courageous and selfless person that those people were?”

The downside in measuring ourselves against the actions of others is that we very likely will find ourselves lacking in one or more areas of our life. It is discouraging to me to doubt that I have the courage of Jeremy Glick, Todd Beamer, Mark Bingham and Tom Burnett, the heroic passengers of United Airlines Flight 93, who having heard of the destruction in New York, told their families that they intended to overpower their captors to prevent a recurrence. I know that I do not have the bravery of the firefighters who gave their lives trying to save lives, or the strength of Michael Benfante and John Cerquiera, who carried Tiana Hamsen down 68 flights of stairs in her wheelchair. Do I have the selflessness to sanctify God's name, Kiddush Hashem, like a Hasidic Jewish man, Abraham Zalmanowitz, who gave up his life on the 27th floor of One World Trade Center by staying with his quadriplegic Catholic coworker, Ed Bayea, after urging Bayea's attendant to leave the building, which saved her life?

Fortunately, there is a hasidic story to address this: The Hasidic master Reb Zusya, just before his death, told his students: When I meet God, God will not ask me, “Zusya, why were you not more like Moses?” God will ask me, “Zusya, why were you not more like Zusya.”

Each of us was created by God with a unique genetic blueprint, and imprinted by our families with a unique social blueprint. There are no two people in the world with the same strengths and weaknesses, skills and interests. Each of us is constantly being stretched and tested, our humanity is constantly being developed. We are not placed in challenging situations because we are well developed human beings; we are placed in those situations in order to allow us to become fully developed human beings.

By this, I mean that I reject the theology that God placed certain passengers on a plane because they were strong and brave enough to overpower the hijackers; I reject the response to parents who have lost a child or others who have gone through an equally horrible tragedy, that “God doesn't give you more than you can handle.” The implicit message is that had I been a weaker

person, God would not have taken my daughter; and that each of the thousands of newly orphaned children and widowed spouses were chosen because they are all strong people who can handle tragic loss.

I read the situation differently. The causes behind the challenges in our lives are complicated. In my case, numerous factors entered into the loss of our daughter, including choices that my wife and I made. On a muscular level, we gain strength by stretching and actually damaging our muscles, so that when they repair themselves, more muscle mass and strength is generated. However, if we severely tear a muscle, it is possible to damage it beyond repair. On a wholistic level, when we successfully meet the challenges that life throws at us and become stronger, we do so because we are able to stretch ourselves and become something beyond that which we were. But there are people who have experienced a traumatic death, a fire, a robbery, or a car accident who are permanently damaged by it, because they were not able to stretch.

So the fact is that God does give us more than we can handle, and we either handle it or not. But we are not judged on how well we handle ourselves based on how well someone else could have handled it -- we are judged based on how well we could have handled it, had we mustered all our strength and our faith and our community and all our other resources, and fought back.

We do not judge ourselves against the heroic passengers of United Airlines Flight 93, or against the firefighters or against any of the individual heroes whose stories are coming to light, but against our own potential for overcoming our weaknesses. We judge ourselves based on the model of the Torah, which is the story of flawed heroes. Even Moses, against whom Zusya cautioned his students of comparing themselves, was only a flawed human being.

We grow by stretching ourselves. We grow by seeking the challenge of new experiences. We grow by meeting new experiences that we did not seek out, and would rather avoid. We grow by taking the pain in our lives and making something entirely new out of it.

Today, I want to invite you to imagine yourself becoming more than you are right now, more than you every thought you could be. Today, I want you to take one specific memories of those about whom you think during the yizkor service, and imagine redefining and stretching your identity to incorporate more fully that memory and that trait into your own life. Today, I want you to take one action towards becoming a better and greater you. Do this just for today. And then tomorrow, start over again, because tomorrow is a new today. And then the next day, and the next day . . . and so on, and thus may this Yom Kippur become your first small step on a great journey.

The Yizkor service begins on page 684.