

Sermons on dying can be a little hard to take. Best to open with something light, and the first place to go for a light-hearted look at death is Woody Allen, who summed up what I suspect many people feel about dying when he said, "I don't mind dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

It's hard to be upbeat on Yom Kippur right before Yizkor. The Yom Kippur experience is centered on death. Although in a rough comparison between Judaism and Christianity, we usually say that Christianity is heaven focused and Judaism is this world focused, Yom Kippur is the major exception. Yom Kippur is without question focused on our deaths. *Inu et nafshoteikhem* - "afflict your bodies" is the central mitzvah of Yom Kippur. We are to torment our bodies, make them experience the beginning of the death process. No food, no water, nothing pleasurable for our body. Yom Kippur is an entire experience between our spiritual selves and God. The ritual is atonement; and if we successfully center our souls, we might have use of our bodies for another year.

Within the Yom Kippur liturgy are two elements which bring us face to face with death. First, we have Yizkor. The most obvious purpose of the Yizkor service is an opportunity to remember our loved ones. Through the liturgy, we contemplate the positive qualities of those we remember and consider how to integrate them into our own lives.

The Yizkor liturgy, however, suggests a deeper reason for the service. We read verses like:

"The days of man are as grass; he flourishes as a flower in the field. The wind passes over it and it is gone. (based on Psalms 90:6 JPS)

"Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow." (Psalms 144:4 JPS)

"Teach us to use all our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom." (Psalms 90:12 JPS)

These verses invite us to contemplate our own mortality, intending that those who do so are more likely to live lives of wisdom and meaning.

The second element of Yom Kippur that forces us to engage death is the Martyrology, or Eleh Ezkerah, section of the Musaf service. In it, we read the story of the Roman Empire's attempt to extinguish Torah by executing a minyan of our early Sages for teaching Torah. Eleh Ezkerah mythologizes a concerted effort to kill Judaism by killing the means to transmit our values. Our Sages' faith in God and dedication to the ideals of Torah are role models for us. However, the graphic way that their deaths are described and the way each of them chose to accept their deaths not only invites but demands us to contemplate our own deaths and how we will be remembered.

Yom Kippur is an attempt to imagine ourselves without our bodies and to imagine how the moment of losing our body affects the way we experience our lives.

The yearning to live a meaningful life infuses our religious tradition. Most of us want our lives to outlive us -- we want to be remembered for something, for at least a few years after our inevitable deaths. Children are a legacy, the good works that we have done are a legacy, the financial contributions that we leave to selected organizations are a legacy.

Today, however, we stand together, young and old alike, at the nexus between life and death. We are all equally at that place approaching the final moments of our life, wondering, imagining, how would we let go of life with grace and dignity. It's a powerful question: How do we live a life of meaning when we face the challenges and possible despair of the end of our life.

Might we give in to despair and resignation, give up on life while there is still life to be lived? Such resignation is passive aggressive, implying not acceptance but anger that our bodies are

slowly dying; giving up not only on treatment but on the hope that we can live out the remainder of our days with meaning.

On the other hand, might we feel a sense of acceptance, understanding that all and any life is a terminal condition? We are all going to die, and this is nothing to fear. Might we accept the limitations and the frailties of our bodies even as we pray for healing and strength? Acceptance is gentle and hopeful. *Tikvah*, hope, is almost a religious obligation. After all, we say a *mi sheberakh* even for those who are terminally ill.

Stuart jokes that my *mi sheberakh* prayers always work -- until the last one. Joking aside, does prayer have the power to change the reality of illness? Perhaps. Every once in a while you'll read of some study that tries to prove scientifically that prayer has a measurable impact on the progress of disease and recovery even if the ill person doesn't know that prayers are being said. I've always been skeptical about the scientific basis for measuring the efficacy of a spiritual effect. However, I believe with absolute certainty that there is great psychological benefit in a person knowing that prayers are being said, and psychological benefit can translate into tangible physical benefits. It's not that the disease process can necessarily be halted -- it is that our relationship to what is happening inside our body can change. The relationship between our mind and our body can change from competition to cooperation.

One way we learn how to live out the end of our lives in harmony is by examining the lives of those who have come in contact with mortality and have had to live, and die, with intention. One such person is Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon professor whose story of dying of pancreatic cancer was told in the book, "The Last Lecture."

He lived his life with humor. The book is based on a talk he gave shortly after his diagnosis in a lecture series formerly known as "The Last Lecture: If you had one last lecture to give before you died, what would it be?" The lecture series had just been renamed, "Journeys," causing Randy to begin his lecture with the observation, "Damn, I finally nailed the venue and they renamed it."

On acceptance of the facts of his illness, he said, "All right. So that is what it is. We can't change it, and we just have to decide how we're going to respond to that. We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand. If I don't seem as depressed or morose as I should be, sorry to disappoint you. And I assure you I am not in denial. It's not like I'm not aware of what's going on."

On what his life is really about, he said:

So today's talk was about my childhood dreams, enabling the dreams of others, and some lessons learned. But did you figure out the head fake? It's not about how to achieve your dreams. It's about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you.

Have you figured out the second head fake? The talk's not for you, it's for my kids.

Over and over again over the course of his illness, he reaffirmed his love for his wife and his children. The last year of his life was a conscious effort to teach his children how to live their lives with joy and enthusiasm.

Another person who died this year and wrote extensively about his own death and others' is former White House Press Secretary Tony Snow. He wrote about Peter Jennings:

Jennings has begun to master the art of being sick, which is not an easy thing to do these days. We live in an anesthetized society. People have developed an almost hysterical aversion to pain, leading the Kevorkians among us to persuade frightened fools to prefer a numb death to a life buffeted by aches and pains.

Peter has discovered that diseases can humble us, hobble us, wear us down — but that only we can surrender our dignity and open the door to despair. The secret of learning to be sick is this: Illness doesn't make you less of what you were. You are still you. In many cases, a bout with sickness stretches your soul, opens your eyes, and introduces you to a world of unimagined grandeur, possibility and joy.

Tony Snow wrote about his best friend, Ken Smith:

... [M]y best friend ... died of cancer in July 2001. He suffered through an agonizing, frustrating ordeal without complaint. When bad news crushed high hopes, he maintained his good cheer. ...

Ken never entertained [...] doubts. He knew a sick person's lot is not to reason why. The disease is what it is. Instead, Ken acted as he always did. He was a courtly guy and a doting host. He actually would apologize when he would flinch or wince with pain, mainly because he didn't want visitors to feel compelled to immerse themselves in pity. He just wanted them to visit and feel at home. ...

Ken left his friends with an example to cherish and love. He knew how to be sick, and how to fill up even dying moments with shimmering bursts of life. ... As he told me soon before his death, "I'm fighting this as hard as I can, but if I don't make it, I'll see you on the other side."

Tony Snow wrote about his own illness:

The art of being sick is not the same as the art of getting well. Some cancer patients recover; some don't. But the ordeal of facing your mortality and feeling your frailty sharpens your perspective about life. You appreciate little things more ferociously. You grasp the mystical power of love. You feel the gravitational pull of faith. And you realize you have received a unique gift — a field of vision others don't have about the power of hope and the limits of fear; a firm set of convictions about what really matters and what does not. You also feel obliged to share these insights — the most important of which is this: There are things far worse than illness — for instance, soullessness.

... [T]he last few months — my time of surgery and chemo — have been the happiest and most thrilling of my life. They have confirmed lessons that seem at once too good to be true, and too important and vital not to be. ...

Nothing makes one feel more alive than the prospect of death and the requirement that one fight for the things that give life its richness, meaning and joy.

Woody Allen said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work ... I want to achieve it through not dying."

Clearly, this is not an option. Rather, listen to Rabbi Irwin Kula, who wrote in his book *Yearnings* [page 280]:

Yom Kippur is in part a way to enact our own death in order to imbue our lives with meaning. The opening practice of Yom Kippur is freeing ourselves from all our promises and obligations: "They shall be null and void" for the next twenty-five hours. We imagine

ourselves as no longer married, a parent, holding a job that we're responsible for. These part of our selves die and we're left alone to contemplate what life would be like without its usual trappings and delights. Who are we without them? There's the sense that we are reassessing everything from our deathbed. What an opportunity! And the next evening we are, in a sense, born again. We accept our obligations back, hopefully at a higher or deeper level of appreciation and meaning.

We are about 70% through our Yom Kippur fast. Unfortunately, the last 30% is the most challenging. May these last 8 hours or so be a time of harnessing death in service of life; redeeming our death from the threat of a meaningless life, and rededicating our life in preparation for a meaningful death. May we, in the words of Plato, "practice dying" each day of our lives so that we may also practicing living fully each day of our lives.