

There is an intentional collection of practices and restrictions associated with Yom Kippur as we observe today. Fasting from food and water is the most well known, but we also refrain from wearing leather, and many also wear white clothing, the color of our burial shroud. While Yom Kippur is not a fast of mourning, it is a day on which we take a step away from the things which connects us to the comforts of life, so as to hammer in the point that we are all mortal beings who will die someday, although we don't know when or how. The Yom Kippur collection of practice helps us to slow down and take seriously the act of reflecting on this life we've been given.

It is entirely countercultural. In our normal lives, we avoid and deny aging and death in a myriad of ways. The cosmetics industry tells us that we should look young and beautiful, and advertisements for botox or hair products or weight loss help us get there. Aging politicians deny they are experiencing effects of getting older. Physician assisted death laws suggest that dying is a better option than aging, with its progressive infirmities. My phone tells me which games will help keep my brain from aging. Self help literature and our devices help us become more efficient at cramming more into our days and more onto our to-do lists. We live every moment of our lives as if we're in a race to do as much stuff as possible before the time clock runs out.

This contrast between our everyday lives and Yom Kippur resonates with the self-help book *4000 Weeks - Time management for Mortals*, by Oliver Burkeman<sup>1</sup>. His thesis is that we have a limited number of weeks on this earth, and no matter how many books we read on time management, no matter efficient we might become, we will inevitably fail to get everything done. There will always be more we could have done. This does not, however, mean that we should try to make sure that we use every second of every day in order not to waste a moment. Leaving things unfinished is not a sign of failure.

Rather, he encourages us to embrace our finitude and accept our mortality. He reminds us that the entire course of human civilization began only about 60 lifetimes ago, and the stretch of human existence is about 22.5 millionth of a percent of the span of the universe. Burkeman invites us to face the truth about our irrelevance in the grand scheme of things, and to use that truth to stop holding ourselves to unreasonably high standards of accomplishment. Instead, he instructs us to aim for living a modestly meaningful life.

You probably know the story of the man throwing starfish into the sea. It goes like this:

“While wandering a deserted beach at dawn, I saw a man in the distance bending and throwing as he walked the endless stretch toward me. As he came near, I could see that he was throwing starfish, abandoned on the sand by the tide, back into the sea. When he was close enough I asked him why he was working so hard at this strange task. He said that the sun would dry the starfish and they would die. I said to him that I thought he was foolish. There were thousands of starfish on miles and miles of beach. One man alone could never make a difference. He smiled as he picked up the next starfish. Hurling it far into the sea he said, "It makes a difference for this one." [Loren Eiseley]

A Jewish version of this message is found in the opening pages of the morning service, suggesting that “Human preeminence over beasts is an illusion, for all is futile.” But we go on to say that “we are God’s people, partners to God’s covenant, descendants of God’s beloved

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1. Thank you to Rabbi Amy Bernstein for recommending the book and sharing an outline of her sermon inspired by the book.

Abraham.” We may be insignificant. But we are the descendants of Abraham, and that means that our lives are important, that each of us, in our own small way, can make a difference.

For the brief moment that our souls flash through the mortal coil of our life on earth, we leave a *reshima*, a residue, a remembrance, a soft impact, of our presence. The very fact that we remember our loved ones, that they gave birth to us, raised us, nurtured us, taught us, mentored us, looked up to us, depended on us, loved us, is proof enough that our presence on this world does not go unnoticed.

The Yizkor message of Yom Kippur is to remember our transience, recall our loved ones, and commit ourselves to aim not for efficient use of our time but rather for impactful and meaningful use of our time.

Burkeman quotes the Millennial social critic Malcolm Harris, who writes:

“It's now common to encounter reports, especially from younger adults, of an all-encompassing, bone-deep burnout...In a world with dishwashers, microwaves and jet engines, time ought to feel more expansive and abundant, thanks to all the hours freed up. But this is nobody's actual experience. Instead, life accelerates, and everyone grows more impatient. It's somehow vastly more aggravating to wait two minutes for the microwave than two hours for the oven.”

The practice of Yom Kippur is to annually shake us out of this unholy rushing and impatience and bring us into the holy NOW, to live in the holy present moment. Yom Kippur is the HARD STOP the Rabbis give us to have us re-orient ourselves to the present by openly acknowledging that we don't know how much of ANY future we have. We have no idea what may come in the year to come; we have no idea what may come tomorrow afternoon.

So remember – You are a beloved creation of God. You are who you are, not the person others suggest you ought to be. At your core, what is your greatest passion and how can you live out that passion in the time that you have? Your priorities, the way you decide what is worth doing and what to set aside, should focus on the things that give your life the highest level of purpose.

Sometimes, we don't do the things we are most excited about because we are afraid that others will not approve. Sometimes we hold back because we're afraid that others expect more of us, a different career, or making more money. Sometimes we hold back because we are afraid of failure, or that we don't have enough time to finish what we've begun.

Don't worry that you might not see your actions reach fruition. Burkeman writes that the architects of the great medieval cathedrals didn't live to see their work completed. Jewish tradition teaches, *Lo alekha hamlakha ligmor*, you don't have to finish, you just have to take the initial steps. John Pemberton didn't live to see Coca Cola because a dominant world-wide beverage company. Steve Jobs didn't live to see his company break 1 trillion dollars, then two trillion dollars, in market value. If you have a dream or a project or some activity that gives your life meaning, it won't really matter if you bequeath the work to others at the end of your time. The point is that you will have done something meaningful with your life, and you will have left something significant for those who follow you, who will remember you at sacred moments of Yizkor.

Burkeman write, “The average human lifespan is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short.” Our tradition places this thought at the center of the Yizkor service: “A human being is like a momentary breeze, a person's days are like a quickly passing shadow.” [Psalm 144] “We come

and go like grass, which in the morning shoots up and renews and by dusk withers and dries up.”  
[Psalm 90]

So give up the quest to become the optimized, infinitely capable, emotionally invincible, fully independent person you're officially supposed to be. Instead, slow yourself down, stop for a moment, and remember that you are a finite, mortal being. Roll up your sleeves and start work on what's possible. Be the beloved child of Abraham and incorporate Torah and mitzvot and service of God into the work you do in this world, and you will be blessed. And someday, your memory will be blessed, as this day you bless the memory of those who came before you.