

Death is a Part of Life
Kol Nidre 5781
Rabbi David E. Levy
Westchester Reform Temple

They meet in the middle of a graveyard. Fear fills them as they look into each other's eyes. They say the ancient words, *Harei At M'kudeshet Li*, and rings encircle each other's fingers. In the midst of death and tragedy, they hold hands for the first time, and pray that their small act of defiance in a hurting world will turn the tides for the better.

In Yiddish, it's called a *Shvartze Chassunah*, literally a Black Wedding. The tradition dates back centuries in Eastern Europe. Whenever a health epidemic would impact a town "...they would arrange a wedding between two poor orphans in the cemetery...the reason being, that in the merit of performing the great deeds of giving charity and escorting a bride, long life is assured."¹

We have not officiated any weddings in cemeteries...yet. Although if I really thought it would turn the tide of this crisis, trust me, we'd be encouraging all our couples to change venues.

Weddings, Yom Kippur, and death, have always been linked in our tradition. The wedding is called a Personal Yom Kippur. Some

¹ [Shvartze Chassuna - EN](#), Warsaw Ghetto Museum, May 22, 2020, quoting Primary source *Otzar kol minhagei Yeshurun*.

couples fast until after the wedding ceremony. In certain Jewish communities, wedding attire is also a burial garment.² Couples even don a kittel, a white robe similar to what I'm wearing now.

Tonight begins our annual dress rehearsal for death. We've given up what keeps us alive: food, drink, all that feeds our appetites and sustains our bodies, we dress in clothes we might be buried in, and consider what death might mean. In confronting death, we consider the meaning of our lives.

As we will read in our Torah tomorrow: "I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life, so that you and your descendants will live!"³ Judaism is a life-affirming tradition: our highest value is *Pikuach Nefesh*, that every life has infinite value, and that we must protect and preserve it. *Pikuach Nefesh* is why we are not together in our sanctuary tonight. Because we believe in the sanctity of life.

By contrast, American culture has been described as a death-denying society. Only in America do we have "Young Invincibles" a whole cohort of 20-somethings who decide that it's in their best financial interest to forgo healthcare coverage. Only in America, do we have hundreds of euphemisms for death, because we can't bear to speak about it: Pass away, pass on, expire, slip

²[Wedding Dresses: Articles of Interest #12 - Episode Text Transcript](#) by Avery Truffleman, June 9, 2020.

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

away. Only in America do we have generations of doctors who were taught to internalize, in the words of Dr. Atul Gawande, that “Death is a Failure.”

Judaism accepts that death is a part of life. But why is that so important? Why should we engage with mortality? Why not do what so many Americans do and just avoid all talk of death?

If we don’t talk about death with those we love, they will have no idea how to respond if they need to make the decision for us. I have sat with so many congregants facing this particular pain. Did my father want a feeding tube? Did my mother want extraordinary, life-saving measures taken if the surgery didn’t go as planned? Did my husband want to live like this? I have found that some of the most helpful advice comes from Dr. Gawande’s important book, *Being Mortal*, which challenges us to consider not so much “How and when do you want to die?”--an unrealistic question if ever there were one--but, rather, “What is the quality of life that you would live for, if you couldn’t do everything you wanted?”⁴

My late grandmother Zelma was exquisitely clear with me, and with anyone who would listen, in her response to Dr. Gawande’s question. She never wanted to live if she could not remember her last conversation. She never wanted to live chained to a machine,

⁴ [Atul Gawande: What Matters in the End, by On Being](#) Jan 11, 2018.

dependent on others. Toward the end, she didn't want to live at all. She asked if we could leave her in the woods. Her mind slowly slipped away, and with each lucid moment she told us that this was not the life she wanted, not anymore.

She prepared us for her death: she named an executor and wrote a will. She wrote an advance directive, giving her daughters medical power of attorney to make decisions for her once she no longer could, and she crafted a living will, a document that clarified what she wanted to have happen, and what she didn't, in the case of a medical emergency. These preparatory steps--and, more to the point, her honesty and directness-- gave us the strength to do what *she* wanted, even when it was painful for *us*. She gave us that gift. But even then she had a painful death, and it didn't diminish our grief. But as Gawande reminds us: "The goal is not a good death. The goal is how do we have as good a life as possible all the way to the very end while coping with the fact...that we are flesh and blood and are going to have limitations as we go along."⁵

What constitutes the acceptable limitations on our lives? When would we rather die than live? Only we know the answers to these questions, and contemplating them often pains us. But when we do, and record them in a living will and an advance directive, we give a

⁵ [9 lessons a physician learned about dying](#), By Ezra Klein Updated Mar 26, 2015, Vox.

gift to those that we leave behind. Just as laying earth on the casket of a loved one is a *mitzvah* known as a *chesed shel emet*, a true act of loving-kindness, that can never be repaid: so too when we prepare for our own eventual end.

Grappling with our deaths also helps us appreciate our lives, according to research by Dr. Laura Carstensen, Director of the *Stanford Center on Longevity*. Her last major study began 19 years ago, in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks. As a nation we were filled with fear, anxious about everything, and worried that death might come sooner, and more violently, than we ever expected.

Carstensen notes: “Once life’s fragility becomes a personal truth instead of a philosophical concept that happens to ‘other people,’ we become more capable of celebrating whatever days and experiences remain to us instead of focusing on everyday hassles. Acknowledging our impermanence makes us more mindful of life’s small moments and our relationships with others.”⁶

So many have shared with me how much they’ve learned about what is truly important during this pandemic. How much they value being with family, sharing a meal, and living the lives they want to live. How certain things that felt urgent and important in the “before

⁶ [Coping with 'Death Awareness' in the COVID-19 Era](#) By Dan Cable, Francesca Gino on May 13, 2020, Scientific American.

times” feel meaningless today. How we all want to move forward into a better future.

But these realizations and even the promises we make to ourselves can be fleeting. Three months after the 9/11 attacks, Carstensen observed that most people forgot their fragility.⁷ We adjusted, and began our new normal. 9/11 changed our society forever, and the aftereffects of Covid-19 will be felt for decades to come. But when the time comes, when we *aren't* afraid to gather, when we *aren't* terrified of every cough or sneeze in the checkout line, when we *aren't* worried about our kids getting infected at a college party, will we continue to make choices that bring more joy, more purpose, and more contentment, into our lives? Can we continue to hold death as a companion to life, and in so doing, build a more fulfilling life?

Judaism is both affirming of life and accepting of death. This is no contradiction. The High Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* in particular clarifies our relationship with mortality. “Who shall live, and who shall die, who by fire and who by water, who by strangling and who by stoning.” It’s a litany of calamity, to be sure, but *Unataneh Tokef* also invites us to engage with our mortality, and, in so doing, to find gratitude and meaning, and not emptiness and

⁷ [9 lessons a physician learned about dying](#), By Ezra Klein Updated Mar 26, 2015, Vox.

nihilism. It concludes that through *Teshuvah*, *T'filah*, and *Tzedakah*, through return to the right path, through prayer, and through righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree. *Teshuvah*, *Tefilah*, *Tzedakah*. Each word in this threefold instruction offers us a way to embrace life even as we accept death.

First, the word *Teshuvah*, repentance and return:

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer teaches:

Do *Teshuvah*--[make amends with yourself, with others, and with God]--one day before your death. Rabbi Eliezer's students asked him: But does a person know the day on which one will die? He answered: All the more so this is a good piece of advice, and one should do *Teshuvah* today, lest one die tomorrow; by following this advice you will spend your entire life in a state of *Teshuvah*,⁸ of returning to your best life.

Every day gives us a chance to do *Teshuvah*, to turn to what we *should* be doing, to turn to what is actually important to us. To repair relationships, and focus on our connection with other people. To return to the person we want to be. Death is the sober reminder that we have only so much time. Do we want to harbor regret and rage? Do we want things left unsaid? Say it now. Release it now. Change things now.

⁸ [Shabbat 153a](#) Babylonian Talmud.

T'filah, meaning prayer, represents the power of faith.⁹ If we have faith, we can thrive in the face of death. Faith doesn't have to be a belief in an afterlife or belief in God, but it can be. At the very least, we need to hold onto the wisdom of Rabbi Simcha Bunim, who said: - "Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket... When feeling lowly and depressed... one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: 'The world was created for me.' (BT Sanhedrin 37B) But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: 'I am but dust and ashes.' (Gen. 18:27)"¹⁰ We need to have faith that our lives have value, that we have value, even as we recognize our frailty, our mortality. Cultivating faith is not easy, but it is a crucial tool in embracing life without denying death.

And finally there's the word *Tzedakah*, which we usually translate "charity" but which really means "righteousness," or "justice."

In giving *Tzedakah*, we focus not on ourselves but on others: acts of *tzedakah* may not redeem the giver from death, but may in fact deliver the recipient from death.¹¹ Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, of blessed memory, believed that this value was core to living a

⁹ "Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something ... Without faith it is impossible to live." [Kohelet, Tolstoy and the Red Heifer \(Chukat - Balak 5780\)](#), Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, June 22, 2020.

¹⁰ Buber, Martin (1948). *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*. Schocken Books. pp. 249–250.

¹¹ Inspired by teachings by Catherine Madsen

meaningful life: “do something outside yourself...Something to repair tears in your community. Something to make life a little better for people less fortunate than you.”¹²

Think back to where we began: the *Shvartze Chassonah*, the Graveyard Wedding. In the maelstrom of a pandemic, communities came together to celebrate life through *tzedakah*: giving two orphans a chance to get married, even under the specter of death. Two people who were totally dependent on *tzedakah* are the symbolic examples we present to God in the community’s hour of need. With death all around, the *Tzedakah* of the Jewish community gave two fragile and frightened human beings a chance to experience the blessings of love and life.

One day, God willing, this pandemic will end. Probably not because of a Graveyard Wedding, but that shouldn’t stop us from doing the life affirming work of *T’shuvah*, *T’filah* and *Tzedakah*.

When this terrible time does come to an end, human nature dictates that we might forget what it’s like to live here, in this moment. The knowledge of our own mortality may again recede, to the backs of our minds; our priorities will change and we will think that everything has gone back to normal. When that day comes--and it will--, and we are no longer living in the shadow of death, day after

¹² [US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg talks about a meaningful life](#), by Kathleen J. Sullivan, February 26, 2017. Stanford News.

day, what will we take with us?

What will we carry from our great encounter with death? How will we live? How will we make the awareness of our death a part--maybe the most meaningful part--of our lives?