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*Confronting Death and Affirming Life*

In 1932, Mary Frye and her husband Claude welcomed a young German-Jewish woman named Margaret Schwarzkopf to their home in this country. Margaret was worried about her mother back in Germany who was ill, but she dared not go back due to reports of a sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents in her homeland. When her mother died she told Frye after a shopping trip that she was so upset that she could not “shed a tear at her mother’s grave.” While Margaret was upstairs, Frye tore off a piece of the brown paper grocery bag from their shopping trip and wrote a poem on it. Allow me to share a popular version of this poem.

Do not stand at my grave and weep  
I am not there; I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow,  
I am the diamond glints on snow,  
I am the sun on ripened grain,  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
When you awaken in the morning's hush  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry,

I am not there; I did not die.

This poem suggests that a person lives on and is present as part of the universe, the world that surrounds us. Whatever we might think about after-life or resurrection though, death comes to us all.

Our own High Holiday poems, the piyutim of our Machzor put this idea squarely before us: *Berosh ha'shanah yikatevun, u'veyom tzom kippur yechatemun...mi yichyeh u'mi yamoot...* On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die...

Yom Kippur magnifies for us the power of considering our mortality. Its rituals seek to put us in touch with it, not so that we live in fear of our end, rather, so that we can celebrate and live our lives as positively and fully as possible with God and the Torah as our guides.

On Yom Kippur we fast, as though we are no longer beings who require nourishment, as though we have ceased to function as normal. And the Rabbis teach us that in *olam ha'ba*, the world to come; there is no eating or drinking. We exist then for a day in the next world, as Rabbi Reuven Hammer describes it, "we wrap ourselves in eternity, and we feel ourselves closer to the angelic than to the human."

On Yom Kippur we leave off leather and traditionally all wear white or the kittel (*touch or point to it*) that is similar in its color and simplicity to the tachrichin, the shrouds we use to bury a Jewish person. Another word for the kittel is sargenes, German word relating to the word sarg, meaning coffin.

We seek today to confess and purify ourselves today from sin. This is similar to the moments before we die when we or someone else on our behalf recites the confessional prayer called Vidui, in which we confront our sins and pray for forgiveness. And when we die the hevra kadisha performs taharah, ritual purification, washing and preparation of the body for burial. Confession and purification, another parallel with Yom Kippur.

And on Yom Kippur we read from Parshat Acharey Mot in Sefer Vayikra the Book of Leviticus. The opening words of the parashah, “Vaydaber Ado—nai el Moshe acharey mot shney bnay Aharon...”, “God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron.” A divine fire consumed his sons Nadav and Avihu after they had brought a strange fire before God.

Our Torah reading, the symbols of the holiday, all remind us about our mortality, but they also point the way for us toward how we can better value every moment of life. By focusing on how to live following the death of Nadav and Avihu, our tradition is really teaching us about life.

Immediately after the opening words, the Torah reading for today tells of the right ways for the priests to approach the altar, and so life in this world, and the relationship with God will continue.

By the priests offering the sacrifices in the proper manner, and through our efforts today to act on the Torah and the mitzvot, we can give thanks to God for life and for God’s blessings.

In the face of death, how do we find ways to value life? Those who work in hospice have a special perspective and insight on this question. I spoke with

Jill, one of the head nurses at a local hospice, and she was able to share with me some of the truths that we face at death that can teach us much about how to value and live our lives.

One of the things she explained that the way we live our lives impacts how we die. The quality of the relationships between other people and us in our final days flows from the way that we relate to people throughout our lives. Yom Kippur is a time for considering how we are living. It compels us to confront our lives before it is too late. We cannot hope or expect that at the *end* of our lives we will experience a transformation. Our personal growth must begin now...

Rabbi Eliezer in the Mishna reflects the urgency of the moment. He teaches: *Shuv yom echad lifnay mitatach*, repent one day before your death.

Professor Henry Abramovitch of Tel Aviv University explains that since we do not know the time of our death, “we ought to treat each day as if it were to be our last.” And he goes on to say, quote, “This awareness of the imminence and inevitability of death, far from demoralizing Jews, brings them all the more into life and its divinely conceived moral dimension.”(Cohen & Mendes-Flohr, 131-138)

Jill also spoke about the way that so many people express regrets about chances in life they felt they should have taken, and regrets about relationships that somehow could not be fixed.

Our ancestor Abraham whom we spent considerable time thinking about during Rosh Hashanah; himself experienced the impact of broken

relationships in his life. With the arrival of Isaac he and Sarah put Hagar and Abraham's first born Ishmael out of the house. Though God promised Ishmael his own fortunes later on, Jewish tradition later portrayed him as a violent pagan, who sought to kill Isaac. After all, he was born of the Egyptian woman Hagar and is then related in spirit to our Egyptian oppressors.

When Abraham dies, somehow Ishmael does teshuvah and goes together with Isaac to bury their father. Rashi, the great Torah scholar, tells us that this reconciliation was known to Abraham from an earlier prophecy that he would die at a "good old age", good here meaning that there would be peace. *We need not wait for a prophecy of reconciliation. We must take the initiative to repair and remake our relationships with each other, with God, and with ourselves, starting today.*

We must do this in the face of a reality that Jill related, the reality that on her hospice service today she finds that so many more families than before want a smaller and smaller role in their loved one's end of life care. Do they pull away at the end *only* because modern life is busy with work and other commitments? Can the experience of the Day of Atonement, a real and powerful near death experience as it were reverse this unfortunate trend? *In the face of this trend, though I have been fortunate to have seen many cases of the opposite attitude within our community. Families who dedicate great care and phenomenal amounts of time to their loved ones. And we should take a moment to wish them all a yasher ko'ach, for continuing strength and setting a wonderful example for us all.*

In hospice, the team of professionals who work with the patients encounter people whose entire lives have been full of pain, like a young man of 21 who has had a terrible, debilitating, disease his whole life, and from working with patients like this hospice workers ask: What will I do with the blessings I have? This 21 year old was able to recognize and appreciate blessings on some level. If that is the case, then how can we train ourselves, at 13, at 26, at 56, at 86 to recognize our blessings? By turning toward God with the blessings that we say and create. By cultivating a culture of thankfulness and appreciation, by giving back. Do these things sound familiar? Don't they sound like: *t'shuvah, tefilah, tzedakah*, repentance, prayer, and acts of charity and justice, the same three things from the Unetaneh Tokef prayer that are said to be *mavirin et ro'a ha'gzerah, that mitigate the severity of the decree levied against us in the coming year...*

We cannot wait to act on all these things that will make the remainder of our lives more meaningful however long we have. We cannot delay, for we will make a pledge later today that is a vow, a *neder*, as in *kol nidrey*, the haunting statement regarding vows that we heard last night.

We will say during yizkor, "Ani noder (or ani noderet) tzedakah ba'adam", "I pledge to perform acts of charity and goodness in their memory." in memory of all those who we will recall in love. A real pledge, a real vow made in public. *We can already begin to think about what is the first thing we will do to honor that vow.*

One thing we may be able to do is to help one of our fellow community members by tending to their final needs. Jewish communities have traditionally had a *chevra kadisha*, literally a “holy society”. A group of people with the holy task of tending to those in the community who have died, and one of their central tasks is preparing the body for burial in a ceremony known as *taharah*. The word *taharah* means purification—and it is a ritual washing of a body. The next step involves dressing the body in the tachrichin, the burial shrouds that the kittel (point to it) resembles.

Today I would like to announce to our community that if some of us can muster the courage to perform this mitzvah, it is time for us to have our own hevra kadisha right here in our community. Instead of families paying several hundred dollars for people to do this for us, people we do not know, who do not know us except in death, instead let us be the ones to take care of our own as we gently prepare them for burial.

With the proper training and courage, anyone can do this mitzvah; men tend to men, and women to women. We need two teams. I ask us today to consider the power and blessing of having a chevra kadisha right here, that we take back and reclaim our care for those in our community who have passed to olam ha’ba, the world to come.

All this is only one way to take the lessons of Yom Kippur and bring them into a new year, shana ha’ba’ah, the year to come.

So let us not live in fear of death. Let us live in celebration of life. There is so much we can do to determine the quality of our lives even in the face of the

greatest challenges that face us. And at the same time, perhaps we can be more at peace with our mortality, having experienced something like it each Yom Kippur. Determination and peacefulness, each finds its echo in two poems by the British poet William Earnest Henley. We see the determination in his poem titled Invictus, the final verse rings out, "It matters not how strait the gate. How charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

And in his other poem Margaritae Sorori, let us conclude with Henley's image of peacefulness, "So be my passing!

My task accomplish'd and the long day done,

My wages taken, and in my heart

Some late lark singing,

Let me be gather'd to the quiet west,

The sundown splendid and serene,

Death.

May we all have a meaningful fast, and g'mar ketivah ve'hatimah tovah, may we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for this New Year.