Yom Kippur 5787 Talk

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The first time I witnessed death, I was ten years old. I sat on the landing of the stairs crying. It was around four in the morning, and my family and I were staying with my cousins in Ohio. My grandmother was downstairs in a bed, at this point in a coma, and we knew she was dying.

My aunt woke up and sat next to me. “What’s wrong Anna?” she asked. I responded, “I’ll never see her again. I’ll never get the chance to say I love you again.” My aunt wrapped an arm around me. “She knows, sweetie. She knows.” The next morning, my grandma was gone. They estimated she passed away around four in the morning, around the same time my aunt and I sat on those stairs. When the funeral home came to take her away, I asked them to wait. I needed more time with her. Somehow, even as a child, being around death wasn’t disturbing to me. Whether she was dead or alive, she was my grandma and I loved her.

On Yom Kippur, we are instructed to rehearse our deaths. There are many ways we embody this practice. It is customary to fast and deprive ourselves of many pleasures or comforts. Some wear a kittel, a burial shroud, or white clothing to symbolize our burial. We say the Vidui, the confessional prayer we say when we are dying. We are instructed to do teshuvah and ask for forgiveness. In many ways, we ritually and theologically reckon with death. But what does it mean to face our own death, really?

Humans have always tried to evade death. In rabbinic literature, we meet the *malach hamavet*, the angel of death. Our sages portrayed death as a messenger sent by Hashem to end life. He is sometimes depicted as carrying a knife, which enables him to complete his divine tasks. However, there are stories of the rabbis tricking him. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi tricks the *malach hamavet* into giving him his knife, and the rabbi escapes into paradise. The Bat Kol, the divine voice, speaks to Rabbi Yehoshua and reprimands him. “Give it to him, for it is necessary for the creations.”

There is a deep longing for death to not be final. In his op-ed for the *New York Times*, comedian Alex Edelman reflects on the death of his close friend. He writes, "I'm doing better, though I still can't believe that Adam is dead. I cannot believe that he is dead all of the time. You think he'd at least take a break for a big awards show or one of the larger publicity events. We've had free cider at a couple of functions, and he's been so busy being dead he hasn't partaken at all, which is unlike him."

Until very recently, death was something that everyone came into contact with frequently. Fewer illnesses were curable, and people died at younger ages, oftentimes at home. In the 21st century, people are living longer and death has been mostly confined to hospitals and nursing homes. So even when people we know die, most of the time we aren't there to witness it. With the explosion of medical technology in the mid-20th century such as the advent of electronically-controlled ventilators and organ transplants, who shall live and who shall die has become a question that is not simply left to God, but is now up to families and care teams in a sanitized environment. And while prolonging life and finding cures to illnesses that were previously untreatable is an amazing blessing, it comes at a cost. The more we have staved off death, and the more death has been confined to medical settings— a place you visit, maybe, rather than a place you live— the more it has become culturally invisible, which means that many of us are not prepared when it does approach us or our loved ones.

How, on an emotional and spiritual level, do we really face death? How does being around death impact us both consciously and unconsciously? How can we prepare for our closest loved ones to die? And above all else, what does it mean to face our own deaths?

The first time I was called as a chaplain to support a family when their loved one died, the patient was a young man. I remember his family on the floor, crying and screaming. I didn't know what to do or how to help. I stood there by the wall clutching a box of tissues. As I continued my chaplaincy training, the initial shock of being around death wore off, for the most part. Not being able to avoid being around death meant that I eventually began to feel as though I could be with it. Grief is often the most challenging experience to sit with. But in death, whatever pain was experienced by the person who died is no more. In death, sometimes, there is a strange peace.

Nevertheless, death is still a stranger to me. Although I speak to people of all ages with serious illness, it is still hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that I will die. When I stop to really think about it, this life matters so much. Do I appreciate what I have? Am I taking life seriously enough? Are the choices I am making supporting me in situations of hardship or discomfort, or are they merely finding escape routes?

One of the Hasidic masters, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, spoke at length about the importance of the *lev nishbar*, the broken heart, and its preciousness to God. Many of Rebbe Nachman's teachings involved using difficult emotions as a way into experiencing joy. In fact, he said that suffering can even enhance the soul. He wrote:

…all [forms of] suffering are called tsuris, for they distress and oppress the body. And when the body is crushed through the tsuris, as a result the soul radiates and is enhanced. For when matter is subjugated, form is enhanced.

Rebbe Nachman's teachings remind us that suffering is not simply something to withstand or overcome, but something that can be worked with to access the divine. Of course, it is not always possible to derive a sense of positivity or hope from experiences of suffering. As psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl wisely pointed out, it is the meaning-making that enables us to survive our suffering. Rebbe Nachman's determination to find joy and connect to Hashem was his way of navigating and making meaning of his profound suffering. In this way we can understand the solemnity of Yom Kippur, and the act of facing our deaths, as a gateway to awakening our hearts to the blessings of life.

Yom Kippur also reminds us that the *tsuris* we endure cannot be rushed through. We must take it one step at a time, and we must be deliberate in each step. In the traditional Torah reading on Yom Kippur, Leviticus 16, Aharon must atone for the sins of himself, his family, and his community, and the sacrificial process that he is instructed to follow is described. In Mishnah Yoma*,* we learn that this tradition continues as the *kohein gadol*, the High Priest, goes through a meticulous set of steps in preparation for the community atonement. He must complete each step perfectly or everything is ruined, and the consequences are life-threatening.

These days, we don't assume that the consequences of not following each step of the Yom Kippur services will be life-threatening. However seriously we take this day, it doesn't carry the same gravity as it did for our ancestors. Yet in a world without a *Beit HaMikdash, a Temple*, in a world in which we avoid death, today is a reminder that our lives and our actions are greatly significant. Death comes for us all, and if we live our lives accepting that and doing our best, when we allow ourselves to fully experience the grief of losing loved ones and of our own lives ending, it need not be a stranger.

In his poem "Tract," William Carlos Williams writes:

…Go with some show
of inconvenience; sit openly—
to the weather, as to grief.
Or do you think you can shut grief in?
What— from us? We who have perhaps
nothing to lose? Share with us
share with us— it will be money
in your pockets.

Go now
I think you are ready.

Williams invites us to open ourselves to grief, and likewise, Jewish tradition reminds us that there is no perfect resolution. We must live with endings, with a lack of closure. Today, we all likely feel uncomfortable in some way. Maybe it's the fasting, or the long services, or the challenging theology. Maybe thinking about death brings up strong feelings about the deaths of those we love or our own deaths. And at the same time, Yom Kippur is an opportunity to remember that we have each other. We pray together, atone together, and support each other in our grief and in our fear.

Being inexperienced with death can make us unprepared to really approach our own lives. What would it mean if we showed up to some of the death-related things we often avoid? If we attended those funerals? If we visited the people that we know that are really sick in the hospital? For me, in choosing to pursue chaplaincy, I've been able to feel more grounded in my own life and in my

connection with God. And so what I encourage you to do is to make those choices that you may otherwise avoid. The people in our lives who are dying need us to be present just as much as we need to witness these moments. If we miss these moments, we miss one of the most significant parts of the human experience. We risk letting our loved ones, and perhaps ourselves, feel isolated in death. Being with death will help you to be in this life and in the world in ways that you might not expect. Maybe none of us can be fully prepared for death, but together, we can get ready.

Go now, I think you are ready.

G'mar chatimah tovah.