

Yom Kippur morning sermon for Yom Kippur 5759 / 1998.

--Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

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Shanah Tovah.

There's a famous Hasidic story that describes a wedding between two members of a particular Hasidic sect. In an age before Deejays, and when wedding bands were rather expensive, the dance music at a wedding was provided by the participants themselves. So each family member and friend of the bride and groom got to choose the next song for the dancing at the wedding reception.

And when it was time to ask the Rebbe to choose a song, he started singing a rousing, joyous melody to some words which are taken from the Unetaneh Tokef prayer which we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur:

Man's origin is dust and his end is dust.

And so the rabbi is now dancing joyously around the room singing these words: "Man's origin is dust and his end is dust!"

Now Hasidic rabbis have a reputation for extraordinary joy and celebration - but still, this was a little weird. And after a few minutes, the couple asked the rabbi: Is there any reason in particular why you chose to lead such a morbid song at our wedding? With all due respect, what on earth gave you the impression that this would be an appropriate song?

And the rebbe responded: "I don't think there's anything depressing whatsoever about the fact that man's origin is dust and his end is dust. Actually, it's something to celebrate. Think about it this way: If man's origin was GOLD and his end was dust, THAT would be something to complain about!"

This story is funny in part because of its stark honesty -- it's an honesty about death which is rather uncommon in our world today.

One contemporary Jewish scholar has referred to Jewish traditions surrounding death and mourning as a "reality-based" approach. At a Jewish funeral, there's no effort whatsoever to cover up the finality of death. The deceased is traditionally not embalmed, not preserved or made up in any way. And the traditional Jewish coffin is a plain wooden box, to permit nature to take its course and to restore the material that makes up the body back to the earth from which it was taken. The liturgy for the funeral reminds us all that death is a natural and inevitable part of life -- no less natural or integral than any other bodily function. And every single morning, our prayers remind us that our lives are finite, and that every person who is born on this earth will eventually die.

My God - the soul you have given me is pure.
You created it and formed it, You breathed it into me
You preserve it within me -- and at some point in the future, you will take it from me.

Our lives will end in death. No one likes to think about this. We spend most of our lives avoiding the issue. But for some reason -- some inexplicable reason -- Jewish tradition brings us back to this reality again and again. Jewish tradition refuses to let ourselves avoid this painful fact -- because focusing on our mortality can help us to enrich our lives.

Those of you who have been here for Rosh haShanah know that this sermon is the third of a series of discussions on what I believe to be the three most significant concepts in a Jewish spiritual understanding of the world. On the first day of Rosh HaShanah, I dealt with how Judaism helps us to learn to see the world through the eyes of a child - how the rituals and prayers in Judaism help us to cultivate our sense of wonder and radical amazement. And on the second day of Rosh haShanah, I discussed how Judaism encourages us to see EACH AND EVERY PERSON WE MEET as an embodiment of the image of God - and thus to see each and every act of human communication as a sacred act.

This morning I would like to share with you the third of these concepts. And this one is by far the most difficult. But it is also the most indispensable -- because only when we have internalized THIS value will we truly make it a priority to cultivate the other two. This THIRD truth relates to how Jewish tradition understands death.

This truth is best expressed in the words of the Psalm that we read every Shabbat morning, and with which we will introduce our Yizkor memorial service in a few moments. Our Machzor translates this verse as follows:

Teach us to use all of our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom.

But like most translations, this English rendition gives only part of the story.

The first word in the Hebrew means to count or to number. So a more precise translation would be "teach us to count all of our days" or "teach us to number all of our days" -- or, as the medieval Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra understands the verse, "teach us to regard our days as numbered." "help us to remember that our days are few." And only when we have learned this - only when we have internalized this truth - will we truly have attained a heart of wisdom.

It's a message that everyone knows intuitively. It's a theme of some of the greatest literature in the world. But no matter how intuitive a truth it is, it is so difficult to grasp until we reach a certain point of age or maturity or awareness.

Many of us here have read or seen Thornton Wilder's play Our Town -- I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of us were assigned to read it in high school.

The main character in this play is Emily, who dies at a young age towards the end of the play -- but she is given the opportunity to go back and re-live one day of her life. She chooses to go back and relive her 14th birthday.

But her joy at being able to relive a joyous day in her life quickly gives way to disappointment. Her parents greet her perfunctorily, virtually oblivious to her. Everyone seems to be so oblivious to the blessings all around them - paying no attention to how quickly their lives will pass by.

And Emily comes to realize that all the people who are alive are really half- dead, and that we are fully alive only in those moments when we are conscious of our treasures.

Emily asks the Stage Manager, who seems to be a stand-in for God in this scene and throughout the play:

"Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute? "

And the Stage Manager responds:

"No. ----- The saints and poets, maybe -- they do some."

And long before she has to, she tells the Stage Manager that she would prefer to return to her grave - it is just too painful to watch those she loves wandering around oblivious to everything meaningful in life - oblivious to their relationships, oblivious to the natural world - oblivious to the finite nature of it all.

But some people DO manage, as Wilder puts it, "to realize life while they live it." And this is the goal to which we all aspire.

Teach us to remember that our days are numbered -- only then will we attain a heart of wisdom.



Usually, when a book hits #1 on the New York Times best-seller list, that's a sure sign that it's a book in which I will have absolutely no interest.

But for much of this year, the book that has been #1 on the NY Times non-fiction best-seller list has been a book I heartily recommend to everyone here. Some of you may have read it already. It's called Tuesdays with Morrie.

It's by the sportswriter, Mitch Albom, who writes about a series of meetings he had with one of his college professors, Morrie Schwartz, as Morrie was in the end stages of a debilitating neurological disease.

One passage stands out for me in this book. It's a passage that demonstrates the clarity of vision that people can achieve when they know that death is near. It's a passage that demonstrates that very often, it is only those who are dying who truly understand life.

When Morrie was in a very advanced stage of his disease -- actually only a few weeks away from death - he was in bed virtually all the time and breathed only with the aid of a respirator. -- Mitch asked him:

"What would you do if you could live just one more day in perfect health? How would you spend that day?"

"Twenty-four hours?" -- Morrie responds.

"Twenty-four hours."

"Let's see -- I'd get up in the morning, do my exercises, have a lovely breakfast of sweet rolls and tea, go for a swim, then have my friends come over for a nice lunch. I'd have them come one or two at a time so we could talk about their families, their issues, talk about how much we mean to each other. Then I'd like to go for a walk, in a garden with some trees, watch their colors, watch the birds, take in the nature that I haven't seen in so long now.

In the evening, we'd all go together to a restaurant with some great pasta, maybe some duck - I love duck - and then we'd dance the rest of the night. I'd dance with all the wonderful dance partners out there, until I was exhausted. And then I'd go home and have a deep, wonderful sleep."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

And Mitch Albom writes, "It was so simple. So average. I was actually a little disappointed. I figured he'd fly to Italy or have lunch with the President or romp on the seashore or try every exotic thing he could think of. After all these months, lying there, unable to move a leg or a foot - how could he find perfection in such an average day?"

Then I realized this was the whole point."

A Jewish spiritual perspective encourages us to recognize the fact that Morrie was able to recognize: There IS perfection in every day -- there is ETERNITY in every day. And this is the eternity that matters. Once we learn to appreciate this eternity to which each of us has continual access, it is that much easier for us to let go of our yearning to live forever. It is then easier for us to embrace the finite nature of our lives on earth - and then to live them to the fullest.

Listen to the wise words of the psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross:

"It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each day is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings."

O God - Teach us to remember that our days are numbered -- only then will we attain a heart of wisdom.



But all too often, it is necessary to have a real confrontation with death in order to shock us into taking these principles seriously. I would like to share with you the story of a famous man who in many ways is responsible for my being here today. He's a man named Leslie Wexner. The name may sound familiar to you -- he's one of the wealthiest people in the United States -- among the chains of stores that he owns or has owned are the Limited; Express; Structure; Lerner New York; Abercrombie and Fitch.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to meet Leslie Wexner -- and I heard him tell a story about his life that I will never forget. Seventeen years ago, Leslie Wexner was already a very successful businessman -- and one of his hobbies was mountain climbing. And on one mountain-climbing trip seventeen years ago, he got separated from his group as the weather took a turn for the worse. He was all alone, clinging to the mountain for dear life, as he came to terms with what he assumed was inevitable - that this was it. He was going to die.

And he realized that he was not really scared of death. What scared and depressed him most was -- looking back at his life. He got a horrible feeling in his stomach and in his heart - a feeling that told him that his life had not made much of a difference in the world. He pictured what the next day's headlines would look like: successful clothing executive dead at age 43. Lived fast, died fast. The articles would talk about all his business achievements, the companies he owned, the companies he bought and sold - but it all seemed so shallow now as he was clinging to the edge of a rock and clinging to his life. And it became obvious to him that something significant was going to change in his life if he survived.

And he did survive -- and he decided to dedicate the rest of his life to making a difference in the world in a more substantive way. He became one of this country's greatest and most generous philanthropists, donating to Jewish and non-Jewish causes in his home town of Columbus, Ohio, and across the country. And among his philanthropic activities, he established the Wexner Foundation, which has given millions of dollars to Jewish institutions to train leaders for the Jewish community. He has also provided fellowships to hundreds of students, myself included, to fund their graduate studies towards careers in the rabbinate, Jewish education and Jewish communal service. And his generosity has had a ripple effect, touching thousands of lives.

Certainly it is only because of Leslie Wexner's generosity that I am able to serve as the rabbi of this community today.

And I bet if we were to ask Leslie Wexner, are you glad you took that risky mountain climbing trip that almost lost you your life? He would say - yes. It was one of the best things I've ever done. As a result of that trip, I got a new lease on life. It was that confrontation with death that pushed me to give my life the meaning that it has today.



And this confrontation with our own mortality is one of the most important themes of the High Holiday season.

Perhaps this theme was expressed best by the German Jewish scholar Franz Rosenzweig. When Rosenzweig was in his 20's, he decided that Judaism was stale and powerless, and it meant absolutely nothing to him - and he decided to convert to Christianity. But he decided to give Judaism one last look. So he went to Yom Kippur services in a small synagogue in Frankfurt, Germany, expecting this to be his final act as a Jew. But there in the synagogue, something unexpected happened - and Rosenzweig changed his mind. Not only did he re-affirm his Jewishness, but he became one of the most influential Jewish philosophers and leaders of our century. And according to Rosenzweig's writings, this transformation took place in part because of how powerful it was for Rosenzweig to see what the people in that small shul were wearing-- the same garments that I'm wearing -- the Kittel and the Tallit.

What is the kittel that I'm wearing? It's more than just a white robe. It's a garment that makes an appearance in times of transition in Judaism. It's traditionally worn on the High Holidays, and at the Passover Seder.

At a wedding, the groom traditionally wears a kittel, as a symbol of a point of transition in his life and a new beginning. And perhaps most importantly, the kittel is virtually identical to a Jewish burial shroud.

In addition, a Jew who regularly wears a Tallit is traditionally buried in the Tallit.

So what are we doing on Yom Kippur? We request atonement from God as we wear our burial shrouds -- as we are dressed for death. And we ask ourselves and each other the most difficult and agonizing questions one can possibly ask: What would happen if I were to die today? What would happen if all my misdeeds went unrepented? What would happen if the story of my life were now a finished book instead of a work in progress? Would I be proud of it? Would it reflect what I have tried my whole life to be, to accomplish? Would I have made a difference in the world in the way I would want?

Most people would rather shy away from these agonizing questions. But for a Jew on the High Holidays, these questions are indispensable. After all, the issue of repentance is irrelevant for someone who has

delusions of immortality. So what if I'm not living my life the way I really want to! I've got plenty of time. I'll come around soon enough - starting tomorrow, or next year, or next decade.

But Yom Kippur thrusts us back into reality and away from these delusions.

O God - Teach us to remember that our days are numbered -- only then will we attain a heart of wisdom.

Last month our community suffered a terrible tragedy with the unexpected death of our friend Gregg Kaplan, a young man who was a beloved leader in our community. We are still shocked and saddened by this loss, as we think about the pain of his parents and his new wife Toby. And there's an additional layer of shock in our community -- because this was a tragic reminder that death CAN strike at any age. Most of us here assume that we have several years left in our lives -- or even several decades. But we have no way of knowing whether or not that is true. Each time a loved one dies, it's a reminder to us that OUR lives are finite as well.

Our tradition regards death as a natural part of life, so mourning and sorrow are not aberrations in our lives. They are inevitable - for everyone. And periodically we assemble together to lend each other support because the loss of our loved ones is the most universal tragedy. And so we gather together for the Yizkor memorial prayers four times a year- on Pesach, Shavuot, Shemini Atzeret, and today, on Yom Kippur. We gather together, praying in a community- but each of us is immersed in our own thoughts, as we summon up mental images of family members and close friends who are no longer with us. We think of their lives - we think of the wisdom that they imparted to us -- we think of how their lives have transformed ours.

But the presence of the other worshippers in this room strengthens us all. We are all part of a community that affirms its members in time of need. And we know that when we pass from this earth, we will also be remembered by a community such as this one.

Before we begin our Yizkor prayers, let us each close our eyes, as we call to mind the beloved parents, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and other relatives and dear friends whom we recall on this day. Let us see their faces in our minds / hear their voices / feel their embraces. Let us take a few minutes of silent meditation.

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