

YK 5775 Life and Death: Mourning's Dress Rehearsal

About two weeks before Rosh Hashanah, I received a call from an old friend. We met when we were both in first grade in the Brandeis School on Long Island. Despite many moves and different schools, we managed to maintain our friendship over all these years.

I was excited to hear from him as all too often too much time passes between our conversations.

I figured that it was a *shanah tovah* call, but there was a lot of background noise.

I asked him: "Where are you?"

"In the hospital."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Well, I have what you have!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm in the ER; it seems like I have Crohn's or Ulcerative Colitis."

"Oy. I'm sorry. That's not great news."

"No, it's OK, it's not so bad."

I reassured him that he would be able to cope with this challenge. Healthy and strong, he would handle this little twist without difficulty.

I had to go back to work; he had to deal with more hospital routine so I wished him well. I offered to call soon to share whatever insights I have garnered over the last couple of decades.

The next I heard was an email from his wife two days later on Saturday night.

"I am sorry to email you on Shabbat, but my time is tight right now. This morning we were given the diagnosis of colon cancer. Surgery is tomorrow. He will have an ostomy for six months. We are not sure of a lot of details yet. Please say a prayer for him."

And with that, everything came crashing to a halt....

You think you know things about the world.

We make plans thinking we have some control.

And then along comes news that turns everything upside down.

We have no control; there is very little we can do. As the saying goes: *a mentsh tracht un Gott lacht* – a human plans and God laughs.

Over the next few days, I found out the absurd truth that one of my best friends, 43 years old, in the best of health, has serious colon cancer.

How could that be?

How can that be right?

Thankfully, I was able to go and visit with him a couple of days before Rosh Hashanah.

Since then, the news has continued to be bad: it's not a great prognosis. While he is very much in my prayers – and I ask you to hold him in yours, there isn't a lot of positive.

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My friend's illness has impacted me at the very core.

I have been with many people just before and just after their deaths; I have been with people just after receiving devastating news like this. I have recited the *Vidui* – the final confessional prayer before death – with people in person, over the phone, and even over Skype when that was needed, but having my dear friend so close to this potential sentence feels very different.

I suppose that I never imagined that I or my own peers could become seriously ill....

Suddenly, life and death crash together. And I am confronted with thoughts of mortality in a way that I simply do not usually experience.

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We gather today on Yom Kippur – the most intense day of the year: a day when we rehearse our own deaths.

There are actually two peak days on the Jewish calendar that relate to loss: *Tish'ah B'Av* and Yom Kippur. Despite some similarities, they are also quite different.

Tish'ah B'Av commemorates the destruction of both *Batei Mikdash* – both Holy Temples – in Jerusalem 2600 and 2000 years ago. These calamities were devastating events for the entire Jewish people, giving rise to the development of significant observances to remember the losses.

Tish'ah B'Av became more than a day to remember those disasters and others that occurred later in Jewish history. It evolved into a critical day of practicing mourning. It is an annual experience of mourning – kind of a test-drill, a rehearsal of mourning so that when we actually experience a loss, we will be better prepared.

How do we do it?

First, like Yom Kippur, it is a full fast day from sunset until dark the next day.

Second, we refrain from other enjoyable activities as well.

Third, like mourners who sit on low stools, we sit on the floor as we listen to *Megillat Eikhah*, the scroll of Lamentations by candlelight.

Fourth, the entire day is destabilized. Instead of donning our *tallit* and *tefillin* at *Shaharit*, at the morning service, we take away that routine ritual, leaving ourselves naked and vulnerable in their absence.

Just as we are exempted from certain positive time-bound commandments after a loved one dies – for example, from death until burial, a mourner does not need to recite the *Shema* at the appropriate time, since the hearts and minds of the bereaved are elsewhere. Similarly, we take the basic, ancient Jewish rituals of *tallit* and *tefillin* and move them to *Minhah*, the afternoon service. We are unbalanced, destabilized.

The *Tishah B'Av* services recall *shivah* as we remove the *nusah*, the regular weekday melody, replacing it with simple speech or sad, dirge-like melodies or *kinot*, sad songs. And then, we reintroduce some of the familiar music as we slowly come out of the mourning.

One of the most critical elements of *Tisha B'Av* is that we do not remain stuck in the mourning period.

We learn both that we will experience losses in our lives and that, God willing, we will learn how to move on and heal from them – at least on some level.

Tish'ah B'Av guides us into the depths of sadness and loss each year, but it also helps lift us up from that state. We learn that we cannot remain in a state of mourning. We must move on.

In fact, just six days after *Tish'ah B'Av*, another special day on the calendar occurs. *Tu B'Av*, the fifteenth of the month of *Av* is a day of love – a day when young singles would wear white and head into the fields to find each other. *Tu B'Av* fully

transforms the mood from sadness to joy, from loss to the possibility of love and new life.

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Yom Kippur contains both some parallels, and some fascinating differences. Both days are major fast days that require *mitzvah* meals, special meals of obligation before them, but the moods are different.

Even before sunset, each day has its own feeling. While each pre-fast meal is called *Se'udah Mafseket* and there is a custom to eat a hard-boiled egg as a symbol of the continuity of life at both of them (as is the custom at the *Seudat Havra'ah*, the meal of consolation that mourners eat immediately after a burial). But before Yom Kippur the mood is more festive – those who eat meat often do; it is a more elaborate, joyful meal. We bless the children and enjoy *hallah*.

We turn to our friends and family (and others) to ask them for *mehilah*, for forgiveness. Asking for atonement from God is the dominant motif of the Yom Kippur liturgy.

And then most powerfully, we wear white, a white *kittel* or other white clothing and a white *tallit*. In fact, it is the only time that we wear a *tallit* at the evening *ma'ariv* service.

And when Yom Kippur comes to a close, we celebrate with another big meal.

What do we make of these differences?

While on both *Tish'ah B'Av* and Yom Kippur, we remove leather shoes – a sign of comfort – from our feet, only on Yom Kippur do we wear freshly-laundered, white clothing; on *Tishah B'Av* our clothes should not be pressed, they are old, reflecting sadness, the clothing of mourners.

The difference is both subtle and significant.

On *Tishah B'Av*, we become mourners. It is a day of national mourning. We all rehearse mourning. Chances are, we will all be mourners at some time in our lives and so we give ourselves the annual practice. We also reassure ourselves with the fact that when we as Jews mourn, we never mourn alone, we mourn as a people. We are in this together.

When we experience loss, the Jewish people mourns with us. That's why we say to each other the traditional greeting in a house of mourning: "*HaMakom yinaḥem etkhem b'tokh she'ar av'lei tziyon virushalyaim* – May God [the Omni-present] console you with the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Thus, our own individual mourning is transformed into a communal experience. The community shows up at the house to extend their love and support. And we need a *minyán*, a quorum of ten adult Jews, to recite the Mourner's Kaddish. We cannot go on without the support of the community.

But, on Yom Kippur, traditionally, a nicely pressed white *kittel* is the garment of choice.

But what does it symbolize?

On one level, I usually explain that we wear the white *kittel* because we are trying to be pure and holy, but it is much more than that.

This white *kittel* is likened to the *takhrikhin*, the white shroud in which we bury the dead. A great equalizer, it effaces differences of class and wealth – our garments look the same. Thus, if we stop and think about it – here, we are rehearsing something very different from *Tish'ah B'Av* – we are not mourning someone else, but preparing for our own deaths.

Think about it.

We fast, we remove physical elements from our lives and become purely spiritual beings, like the angels, like a soul without a body.

We ask for forgiveness over and over again. And the name of the prayer we recite?

The *Vidui* – the confessional – but the *Vidui* we recite on Yom Kippur got its liturgical start as the prayer we recite just before death. The *Vidui* is the final confession:

"My God and God of my ancestors, accept my prayer. Do not turn away. Forgive me for all the times I may have disappointed You. I am aware of the wrongs I have committed. May my pain and suffering serve as atonement. Forgive my shortcomings, for against You have I sinned. May it be Your will, *Adonai* my God and

God of my ancestors, that I live now with a clear conscience and in accordance with Your will. Send a *refu'ah sh'leimah*, a complete healing, to me and to all who suffer.”

If possible, one says it for one's self, but if that is not possible, the rabbi or a family member recites it on behalf of the one who is dying. Rabbi Fel and I are always available to recite the *Vidui* if needed.

On Yom Kippur, the words are changed somewhat to an alphabetical list of wrong-doing – but we are supposed to feel some of that same intensity.

What if this were our last day of life?

How are we supposed to live it?

Rabbi Eliezer in the *Mishnah* teaches: “*Shuv yom ehad lifnei mitatkha* – repent one day before your death.” (*Avot* 2:15)

“One of his students asked ‘does a person know on what day he will die?’ He replied, ‘All the more – let him repent today lest he die on the morrow; let him repent on the morrow lest he die the day after. Thus all his days will be spent in repentance.’” (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan*)

We should perform *teshuvah* today, for tomorrow may be our last. But could Rabbi Eliezer have imagined a world where you might actually know that you only have a few months or years to live.

What then?

How does one live such a life?

How does one support someone in that situation?

Perhaps it is not so different – we are all supposed to live our lives with the deep and fundamental understanding that life is so very tenuous, so very fragile, so very precious.

Maybe only then do we truly appreciate how to approach each human being – with great care, with great respect, with great love.

Maybe only on a day like today, when we rehearse our own death do we finally come to terms with our own mortality and deeply feel the vulnerability that lies at the core of human existence.

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These ten days have been an elaborate ritualized buildup to our own deaths. First, a trial – Rosh Hashanah, the day of Judgment, the day of Remembrance. We were called into the court with a trumpet.

We spent a week pleading our case – trying our best to ask for forgiveness, from others, from God.

We went to *minyán* early for *Selihot*, said additional prayers of forgiveness, and then we arrive today for our sentencing.

We pray it will be OK.

But perhaps it will not.

Perhaps yesterday's meal was our last. We dressed in burial shrouds to return to our Creator. Our soul awaits its reunion with the Almighty.

Rabbi Alan Lew explains this day masterfully in his *tour de force*, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*:

“For the next twenty-four hours you rehearse your own death. You wear a shroud and, like a dead person, you neither eat nor drink nor fornicate. You summon the desperate strength of life's last moments. A great wall of speech is hurled against your heart again and again; a fist beats against the wall of your heart relentlessly until you are brokenhearted and confess to your great crime. You are a human being, guilty of every crime imaginable. Your heart is cracking through its shell to be reborn. [...] This is your last chance. Everyone has run out of time. Every heart has broken. The gate clangs shut, the great horn sounds one last time. You feel curiously lighthearted and clean.” (pp. 4-5)

That is Yom Kippur. A recital of death. Whether it is Yom Kippur or literally, our own deaths, it is not all despair. While for those we leave behind, it is torture. For us, there is a silver lining; our soul will reunite with its Maker. We will finally be at peace, at one with God. And that is how we will feel tonight when Yom Kippur ends. If we have worked hard at *teshuvah*, *tzedakah*, and *tefillah* – asking for repentance from God and others, giving charity and performing acts of loving-kindness, and engaging in prayer, our spiritual practices, we will be reconciled with God.

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There is a custom to immerse in the *mikveh* before these High Holy Days. While my original plan of doing so before Rosh Hashanah had to be changed, I was able to go before Yom Kippur. There is something so visceral about immersing in those waters.

My mind wandered to the deceased and the bereaved. Before the *met*, the dead body, is lovingly dressed in the *takhrikhin*, in the burial shroud, by our new Community *Hevra Kadisha*, our burial society, the body is washed. (Our new Community *Hevra Kadisha*, led by our members Judith Himber and Hal Miller-Jacobs is doing quite well with over six dozen *tohorot* (ritual washings) completed in its first nine months and our community has the most volunteers!)

There are actually two washings – one for cleanliness and the second, a spiritual washing.

It is quite similar to the *mikveh* – one must shower and clean one's self before entering into the *mikveh* for the spiritual immersion.

There are multiple sides to the *mikveh* – the waters swallow us up – taking us in and for a moment, there is only water – a temporary sensation of drowning, but also an incredibly calming sensation – everything else in the world disappears.

But then we come up – we emerge from the waters, the *mayyim hayyim*, the living waters – we are reborn.

Our souls have been renewed.

Emerging from these birth waters of life, we feel the *Shekhinah*, God's most immanent aspect, nurturing us, embracing us.

The *mikveh* on Monday was so healing – the warmth of the water, the seven steps of preparation and of descent into the water, the subdued lights which changed from color to color bathed me in a feeling of being gently held and calmed.

Coming out of the water, I was suddenly reminded of the good, of life-sustaining water. No matter what comes, we are wrapped in God's arms, as I was enveloped in the warmth of the water.

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Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says of Yom Kippur and Tu B'Av: "*Lo hayu yamim tovim l'ysra'el* – there are no better days for Israel" because we know that God is

listening and forgiving so it's not a sad day. It is also because, in the rabbinic mind, it is the wedding between God and the Jewish people.

The rabbis explain ancient Jewish history like this: Moshe went up to Sinai on *Shavuot* and received the Ten Commandments, returning back down forty days later to find the people engaged in idolatry with the Golden Calf – that is the 17th of *Tammuz*, a day of mourning leading into *Tish'ah B'Av*, the rupture in the relationship between God and Israel. Moshe then ascends Mount Sinai for the second time on *Rosh Hodesh Elul*, the beginning of the final month of the year and spends another forty days on top of the mountain.

He returns with the second set of tablets today, on Yom Kippur, and thus, today is also the marriage between God and the Jewish people. While it's had its ups and downs, it is a marriage that is still valid, thousands of years later.

Thus, today contains a layer of joy. It is a good day, a *yom tov* – and we wish each other: *gut yontif*, unlike *Tish'ah B'Av* when we do not greet each other at all – according to the tradition.

Yom Kippur is the awareness that God will take us back. We know we can perform *teshuvah* and God will accept our atonement. God is waiting for us – either in this realm or the world-to-come.

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As one who loves a well-structured sermon, I should now return to my friend. But I can't, I just can't.

I can't put him in just before we turn to *Yizkor*. And the truth is, while I am desperately concerned for him, my emotions are also profoundly impacted because I am thinking not just of him, but of others as well, including me.

If he is vulnerable, I am vulnerable.

I must confront my own mortality.

Each year we are given this day to rehearse our own deaths. We turn to our friends and ask for *mehilah*, imagining that this could be our last chance.

We sense that our lives are hanging in the balance; we know not what will be.

All we can do is try to emerge from the water with a deeper appreciation of the complexity and the gifts that our lives bring us.

Let us renew our commitment to God, to others, to the *mitzvot*, to healing the world, to being fully present with ourselves in this unknowable, fragile existence of ours.

May we all be sealed for a year of health and happiness, a year of blessing, a year of peace and let us say: Amen.