

Intimations of Mortality

We sit in a beautiful, green building. It is an inviting space in which to pray. In terms of actual environmental impact, it is a drop in the ocean of what we must do. As a symbol – and symbols are important – it is a sign of hope. Hope that there are human beings, in this case fellow Jews, who are willing to use their not inconsiderable resources to make a statement about the place of human beings in the web of creation, about the absolute necessity to slow the expansion of our species' carbon footprint. It is a gesture of love toward the next generation, who will otherwise be paying off the debts, both environmental and financial, accrued by their parents and grandparents and passed on to them as a negative inheritance. This is a good place, a holy place; I feel content to be here. But “contentment” does not capture the mood of this day. Confronting our vulnerability and the certainty of death is the awareness that governs Yom Kippur.

The year now past was, for me, the one in which I began to sense the rustling of mortality. I am not the only one. Contingency is everywhere, it seems. Arthur Waskow was in a car accident. He was lucky, as such things go, but his insurance company has so far refused to cover the recommended rehab. So Arthur turned his experience into a plea for reason and compassion and a strong public option. Garrison Keillor wrote a column about having a stroke, and how one turns reflective as the body becomes less and less one's reliable partner.

Some of us have had surgery this year, are recovering, thank God, from illness or injury. There were a couple of close calls on bicycles.

Also this past year my Rabbi died, on the second day of Hanukkah. Arnold Jacob Wolf was my teacher from the time I was 9 years old. I could so NOT be a rabbi like him, that I had to figure out how to be myself. I am still figuring that out.

Roger Rosenblatt, writer and journalist, has lived through the sudden death of his daughter, age 37, a physician and mother of three. Rosenblatt wrote in *The New Yorker* about how he and his wife have moved in with their son-in-law and grandchildren.

Sammy is tall, too, with dark hair and wide-set, ruminative eyes. He brings me a book to read, about a caterpillar. He brings another, which just happened to be in the house, called “Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children.” The book says, “There's a beginning and an end for everything that is alive. In between is living.” The book illustrates its lessons with pictures of birds, fish, plants, and people. I lean back on the couch with Sammy tucked in the crook of my arm, and read to him about the beauty of death.¹

¹ Roger Rosenblatt, “Making Toast” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 15, 2008
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/12/15/081215fa_fact_rosenblatt?currentPage=2

Franz Rosenzweig's magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, begins with the terror the individual feels when contemplating death. Through 400 pages of dense yet passionate philosophizing, Rosenzweig arrives at the doorway marked, "To Life!" This is the Jewish affirmation of a charismatic teacher who died young of a degenerative disease.

How do we face death? Is this not one of the central questions of every religion? We must learn how to die – not just to accept the fact of death, but how to face it and incorporate its reality into our living. We struggle to understand injustice and evil – why good people suffer. Death and suffering – these are the core issues around which every religious tradition organizes itself. For Judaism, it is not that we have the answers; we have, and are still having, the conversation. We have our own particular discourse around these large questions, with some answers, though never final answers. Underlying our thinking and speaking about death is the bottom line that insists that our lives have meaning and purpose, even when meaning and purpose are occluded by pain or by events that race way beyond our control.

Tasting our vulnerability firsthand – having health, or employment, or loved ones taken away – certainly forces the issue of mortality. These life lessons must be viewed in the wider context of wisdom. For it is not only me, the individual ego, who has faced this: it is the common lot of all of us. So there are lessons of perspective, insights that come to us from Torah, and from encounters, both intended and accidental, that speak to us from outside ourselves.

Further on in his *New Yorker* article, Roger Rosenblatt mentions a book:

One of the few pieces of writing I have done in the year since Amy died was a book review for the *Washington Post Book World*. The novel was David Lodge's "Deaf Sentence"—about a retired linguistics professor, Desmond Bates, who is losing his hearing and who is also deaf to life until, against his will, he visits Auschwitz, where the silence teaches him to hear. He reads a letter from a prisoner in the camp to his wife, discovered in a pile of human ashes. One sentence rises up to Desmond: "If there have been, at various times, trifling misunderstandings in our life, now I see how one was unable to value the passing time." As far as I can tell, this is how to live—to value the passing time.

Time does pass. Or, as I learned by walking to the other end of the Midway in Hyde Park and contemplating Laredo Taft's monumental Fountain of Time, Time stands still and it is we who pass by, as if in review. (Taft, one of the great sculptors of his generation, by the way, is the subject of a book by Lynn Young, our former office assistant; not yet published, but I am looking forward to it.) If you have not recently viewed the Fountain, at the western end of the Midway, I urge you to visit.

Beethoven was in terrible shape in his last years. There were times when he wished to die, but someone had said to him, As long as you can do one good thing for someone else, you have to stay around. It is our incredible good fortune that he battled on, and produced the late quartets, the last piano sonatas, the Ninth Symphony. Absorbing and finding a place for our losses is part of what this awesome day offers and expects of us.

One of the young Palestinian musicians who was a member of Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra said in a discussion at Spertus some months ago, "You play music, but you do not own the piece." One might say something similar about land: you live on it, but you do not own it. And one might say something similar about one's life: I live it, but I do not own it. It belongs to Someone Else.

Each of these voices, from literature, art, and music, offers a sense of perspective, a glimpse of larger meaning and purpose in the face of finitude.

In our tradition, Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuvah* – Laws of Repentance - is the number one text to be studying at this time of year.

The Rambam places his Laws of Repentance in *Sefer HaMada* (The Book of Knowledge), the first part of his great code where he sets down the ideas and practices that he considers of central importance. Maimonides does not connect *teshuvah* primarily to Yom Kippur, but rather situates it as a fundamental practice and value of Judaism. It is foundational. In the middle of Chapter 2, however, he does come to Yom Kippur. After stating that Yom Kippur is a time of *teshuvah* for everyone, he codifies the practice of reciting the "Vidui," the confessional prayer, several times over the course of the day. (One should even recite it prior to eating the meal before the fast – lest you choke on your food and die, and miss the opportunity to recite the Vidui on Yom Kippur!) And then he makes this interesting statement:

The Vidui that all Jews are accustomed to recite [includes] the central phrase "...but we have sinned..." Transgressions for which one confesses on *this* Yom Kippur, one returns and confesses them (again) on *another* Yom Kippur, even though one has stood firm in one's previous resolve to do teshuvah, as it is said [and here he cites Psalm 51:5]: "For I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin."

Maimonides takes note of the repetitious and formulaic prayers of the day, and discovers a deeper meaning. We must not imagine that the slate is wiped completely clean. Yom Kippur is not a day of cheap grace, but an opportunity to look deep within ourselves, and to consider the trajectory of our lives.

Rabbi Yehudah Gellman explains it this way:

Contrary to popular conceptions, the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur does not relate to the wrongdoings of the previous year, as such. The unit of time over which we must confess our sins is the whole of our past lives. ... On Yom Kippur I must look at the whole of my life and confront it as I must when turning towards death ... As Yom Kippur approaches I cease eating and drinking ... [and] don the raiments of the dead, and in that posture confront the whole of my life and its bearing on eternity. In this enactment exists the possibility of turning into myself, withdrawing from the entanglements and attachments

of life, into an authenticity which makes *teshuvah* possible. In this state of mind I say the confession said by the person who is dying.²

Now it is well-known that Yom Kippur is a day on which we imagine, and prepare for, death. It is not so well-known that the confessions of Yom Kippur are not simply about the past year, but about our entire lives. Teshuvah should be done every day. It is part of the regular weekday Amidah. The Rabbis teach us that we should repent one day before our death, which means, of course, every day, since no one knows in advance what day that will be. In any case, the sins of the past year should have been taken care of already. Yom Kippur, then, is for something else, not about the “clean slate” with which we imagine leaving at the end of this day. It’s like erasing your hard drive (another brush with mortality I experienced this past year). It is never completely erased! Whatever was there is still there in some form, and if you are lucky (in the case of the hard drive), or unlucky (in the case of dredging up past sins), that which seemed to be erased can be brought once more to light.

So Yom Kippur is the day especially set aside not for erasing my latest mistakes, but for confronting my entire life. Think of the difference this makes. Rather than just the past year, with its failings and successes, we review the whole of our lives. Am I drifting along, or navigating? And if I am navigating, then with what compass? Toward what have I been striving? How have I used, and misused, the precious time granted to me on earth? How much have I appreciated how much has been given to me? How have I used my particular gifts and resources, and how have I squandered resources, my own and the planet’s?

If I may push a little further one of Rabbi Gellman’s phrases: he says that there “exists the possibility of turning into myself, withdrawing from the entanglements and attachments of life, into an authenticity which makes *teshuvah* possible.” When he says “turning into myself,” I believe he means turning inward, withdrawing in order to examine oneself more closely. But I also hear in this phrase the possibility of “turning into myself,” coming closer to becoming the person I am meant to be.

In his novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leo Tolstoy imagines a character on his deathbed asking himself:

“What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply was *not the real thing*?”

It occurred to him that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before—that he had not lived the kind of life he should have—might in fact be true. It occurred to him that those scarcely perceptible impulses of his to protest what people of high rank considered good, vague impulses which he had always suppressed, might have been precisely what mattered, and all the rest not been the real thing. His official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in his profession—all these might not have been the real thing. He tried to come up with a defense of these things and suddenly became aware of the insubstantiality of them all. And there was nothing left to defend.³

² Yehudah Gellman, “Teshuvah and Authenticity.” *Tradition* 20 (Fall 1982), 251-52. Cited in Bryna Jocheved Levy, *Waiting for Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year* (JPS, 2008), 112.

³ Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (Bantam, 2004), 108-109. Thanks to Rabbi Gordon Tucker.

This is not just a question of “missing the mark,” as we like to translate the word *het*. Today is the urgent invitation to focus, bring the goal and purpose into view, to examine and re-align my energies with my best intentions.

As Roger Rosenblatt read to his grandson Sammy: “There’s a beginning and an end for everything that is alive. In between is living.” And as he learned from Desmond Bates, who learned it from a letter found at Auschwitz: “...this is how to live—to value the passing time.”

This is the moment to adjust our course, to value the passing time, to attend to the “vague impulses” urging a turn in the direction of a truer, more authentic self. Digging through the clutter, letting go for a moment at least of all that is passing, we reach for the bedrock that is ours alone to know and carry forward.

[Pause before Yikzkor]

We bear witness to the interconnectedness of everything. *Zikaron*, remembrance, it has been said, is the ability to see connections. We each have our place in the web of history and memory. We are but a moment between all those generations that have passed through, and the generations waiting to be born. But we are, right now, the essential connecting link. We seek our meaning as a tiny part of that vast network of existence that called us into being against our will, and will dispatch us – equally against our will. We are participants in an ancient conversation, a continual striving to discover the holiness that underlies it all. Each of us draws light from the great light that God called into being before the first day. Each of us takes from that light a tiny spark, which will be returned to its Source in due time. We focus now on the larger web that holds us, that lends us light and breath and meaning. We turn the light of our attention on those whom we keep in mind, whose lives have shed light upon our paths. We hold them in the gossamer web of our remembrance, and we ask God to bind them in the sturdy web of remembrance that is God’s alone.