“Fear of Death”

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Let me start by reading you something from a person who just passed away last month from metastatic cancer coming from melanoma in the eye. This is what he wrote when he was diagnosed back in February:

*Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life.*

*On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.*

*This will involve audacity, clarity and plain speaking; trying to straighten my accounts with the world. But there will be time, too, for some fun (and even some silliness, as well).*

*I feel a sudden clear focus and perspective. There is no time for anything inessential. I must focus on myself, my work and my friends. I shall no longer look at “News Hour” every night. I shall no longer pay any attention to politics or arguments about global warming.*

*This is not indifference but detachment — I still care deeply about the Middle East, about global warming, about growing inequality, but these are no longer my business; they belong to the future. I rejoice when I meet gifted young people — even the one who biopsied and diagnosed my metastases. I feel the future is in good hands.*

*I have been increasingly conscious, for the last 10 years or so, of deaths among my contemporaries. My generation is on the way out, and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of part of myself. There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate — the genetic and neural fate — of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.*

*I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return.*

Those were the words of Oliver Sacks, brilliant British neurologist and author. Known for his popular books containing case studies of some of his patients, his autobiography “Awakenings” was adapted into the Academy Award nominated film in 1999 starring Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro. Countless awards. Countless accomplishments.

And yet, it was the series of essays he wrote for the New York Times right before his death that hit home to me in a way I cannot fully describe. If you haven’t read them, trust me, they are extraordinary. I felt like he was offering me a cautionary tale about life and death and talking directly to me as his final days came to pass.

You know what keeps me up at night?

Death.

My daughter Avrah and I have this somewhat eclectic custom we started this past year. We read the obituaries together. I know. Some people do Jumbles together. Read the comics together…we reads the obits. That sounds morbid but some of the most creative work is found on those pages. It becomes quite interesting and sometimes quite humorous to discover what people put into an obit.

We do this every Shabbat and holiday when we are having breakfast together and yet, despite this admittedly weird bonding moment, we are still in two rather different places when we read them, Avrah and I. Because I do more than just read them. To quote Rabbi Kushner, I am at the stage of life that I am starting to look more carefully at the ages.

I am 54 years old. Not old by most standards, but ever since I turned 50, I have been much more contemplative about death. For some time now, death is keeping me up at night.

Spoiler alert: I am not going to talk about the afterlife. This is not a sermon about the hereafter. I believe in an afterlife, not just because our tradition teaches us to but because I do. In Judaism, the belief in afterlife is less a leap of faith than a logical outgrowth of other Jewish beliefs. If one starts with a belief in a God who is all-powerful, all-good and all-just, one cannot believe that this world, in which evil far too often triumphs, is the only arena in which human life exists. If this existence is the final word, and God permits evil to win, then it cannot be that God is good. Thus, when someone says he or she believes in a good God but not in afterlife, it would seem that either they have not thought the issue through, or they don't believe in the God of our faith who is good, just and moral.

Judaism believes that God is good and believes that God rewards good people and punishes the wicked; Judaism does not believe that Adolf Hitler and his victims share the same fate. Beyond that, we say very little and concern ourselves even less with Heaven. We are asked to leave afterlife in God's hands and worry more about what we do in this world.

And so, like a belief in G-d, I put the Hereafter in the same category as an appreciation of music; some people have an ear for it and some do not. Firmly believing that there is a Heaven, that our souls continue on, is of great comfort to me and I know to others. I have an ear for it.

And so that’s not why death keeps me up at night. The fear of my existence ending, vanishing, and that this life is all there is, doesn’t worry me at all.

That is not what keeps me up.

I also have no regrets about my life. And no feelings that even if something should happen now, I have left anything on the table. G-d forbid, something should ever happen, I want my family and you to know that I leave this world for the hereafter, completely content and utterly intoxicated with life. So much blessing in my life: community, family, friends, an extraordinary career. I owe so many people a debt of thanks: my parents who brought me to this great country, raised me, educated me; my wife who I adore and is my partner in everything; my children who bring me such joy; my bar mitzvah teacher who tallit I proudly wear today and who started me on this road; I owe all of you a debt I can never repay for allowing me to serve this community. I owe Hashem who has blessed me beyond words.

I say today and am glad to able to think this out loud at a time when we are in the realm of the hypothetical, that I would leave this world at peace with G-d and my fellow human beings. I feel rewarded, fulfilled, and with a feeling of having lived more intensely than I could have ever hoped for.

I have always tried to live my life by an adage I once used for a eulogy for a great man in our community: When you were born, the world laughed and you cried. Live your life so than when you die, you laugh and the world cries.

That’s me. I am doing all I can to live that way.

And I hope you are.

So I don’t fear death because I believe in an afterlife.

And I am not kept up because of regrets for I have none.

So what is it about death that robs me of sleep?

It is because I have reached a point in my life that I have started thinking about death and realizing that I never want this to end. Not because I am afraid this is all there is or that I somehow missed out on something, but because I love life. I so love being alive.Toparaphrase Oliver Sacks: awake at night and in the second half of my existence, I now see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. I am not finished with life and I never want to be. I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen friendships, to do great things, to love, to write more, to speak more, to experience, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight and to impact the lives of others for a blessing. I never want it to end.

Ask Marilyn. She hates the way I get up. Every day, I say Modeh Ani L’fanecha, our first prayer each morning, with such joy: “I offer thanks before you, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.”

That is how I feel.

Life is a gift.

And when I read the words of an Oliver Sacks, a man of such accomplishment and brilliance, I cannot wrap my brain around the reality that this world has to end…for all of us…for me.

I have seen so many vibrant, passionate people and see their lives slip away. And know that will be all of us. I walk through the cemetery each time, and see not graves, not monuments but people I never thought would ever leave us. I look at our memorial tablets and just stare, looking at people I knew, loved and said farewell to.

That is going to be all of us.

I never realized how much death is a part of my career. I am every funeral. I hear every cry and am asked to wipe away every tear. And maybe my fear is that because I have witnessed too much death, I am too aware of how fleeting this existence is.

I fear death and it keeps me up at night because I don’t want to ever let go of this world.

Do yourself a favor. I think we have a copy in our library but I just read it again online: Louis Ginzberg’s *Legends of the Jews*. He gathers the vast collection of legends and midrashim from Adam to Eshter and his wealth of material on Moses makes our great leader and teacher come to life in ways that are just so touching. The legends Ginzberg collects concerning Moses and his day of passing are incredible.

If anyone should have welcomed death, it would have been Moses. Moses lived a full and unbelievably complete life of 120 years. Decades of leadership. Accomplishments. Leading an entire nation to their destiny. Talking to G-d face to face.

And yet, when it came time to die, Moses doesn’t leave this earth at peace.

He resists death. He argues with G-d. He begs G-d for more time. Not because of any fears of death and not out of regrets, but because he wanted more.

That is what keeps me up. Not death but the realization that it all comes to an end.

So, how do I overcome these feelings that can threaten to overwhelm?

Let me share with you what I try to think about during these 24 hours of Yom Kippur. I will be honest, I do very little atoning. Very little. Not that I have not sinned before G-d or before human beings. And not that I don’t beat my chest, say the right words and think about where I have fallen short. But that is not why I am here and not what does this day mean to me. Of all days, even Shabbat, I am here to celebrate life, and to relearn what life is really all about.

What do I mean?

Well, here is the prayer that resonates most with me. It is the paragraph that follows one of the most sacred prayers in our tradition: The Un’tane Tokef. The paragraph on the next page is “Adam Yesodo”. Those words are so hauntingly beautiful to me.

*“Man comes from dust and ends in dust, he wins his bread at the risk of his life. He is the potsherd that breaks, the grass that withers, the flower that fades, the shadow that passes, the cloud that vanishes, the breeze that blows, the dust that floats, the dream that flies away.”*

That is what I think about all Yom Kippur: how fleeting life is. How fragile our existence is. And, therefore, how precious life is. I cannot avoid death. None of us can. But we learn to can embrace life while we have it.

And learn to live it to the fullest.

And so what should we do to learn that lesson? We fast for 24 hours. No food. No water. We also do not bathe, anoint, wear shoes (at least not leather ones) and have no intimacy. Why? Well, halachically, when the Torah speaks of this holiday in Leviticus, it says:

*"And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: That in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month,* ***ye shall afflict your souls****, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourns among you... It shall be a sabbath of rest unto you, and ye shall afflict your souls, by a statute for ever."*

*(Leviticus 16:29, 31)*

“You shall afflict your souls.” Thus, no food and water, no bathing, no anointing, no traveling on foot comfortably, no intimacy. Yet, I love the way the *Eytz Chaim* (Torah commentary) translates the Hebrew words; “veneetem et nafshoteychem” (“Afflicted your souls”). They translate it as: “practice self-denial”.

Not affliction. Self-denial.

In other words for one long day, don’t eat, don’t drink, don’t bath or anoint, don’t wear shoes and do not have intimacy. Not to punish and not to afflict, but to remind you what you should do tomorrow. And the next day. And the day after that. Deny yourself today to remind you at sundown tonight and this coming year of how wonderful it is to live.

To enjoy food and drink. To recognize how liberating it is to move, to walk, and to travel. To realize how glorious it is to feel refreshed by water. To know how wonderful it is to anoint and feel comfortable being seen and in the presence of others. To understand how extraordinary it is to celebrate human relationships and intimacy.

One day of self- denial to remind you of what should keep you up at night. And that is that life ends for all of us in the world. We only have it for a short time. We are truly the dust that floats, the flower that fades, the dreams that flies away.

We cannot stop that but we can embrace life to the fullest while there is still time.

After these holidays, you must think I am up all night. On Rosh Hashanah, I was up because I worry about how fragmented our people are and how disconnected the younger generation is to Israel. Last night, I am kept up because of my fears for this community’s future.

You are right. I don’t sleep a lot. Sleep is highly overrated. I know what doctors advise us about sleep and they are right. But while sleep may not be overrated, life is too often underrated. Life is so precious, so important, and so deserving of us grabbing hold of it with intensity and passion.

We don’t have a lot of time. We need to make the most of it.

I ask many of you who are here and are about to leave before Yizkor to stay just a little longer. Stay for Yizkor. You say have no one to say kaddish for? Wonderful. Thankfully, neither do I. But stay and hear the prayers, think about death and then think of yourself as kaddish is being recited. Kaddish will one day be said for you. But today, stand and say it *for yourself*. Remind yourself of how life will soon be gone for you.

And then in the days to come, teach yourself to make the most of the time remaining.

Amen