

“Facing Death – Choosing Life”

Rabbi Bob Saks – Second Evening of Rosh ha-Shana 2006

Congregation Bet Mishpachah

My friends, we gather this evening at the junction of summer and fall, at the point where earth’s life at its most vigorous passes into autumn’s decline and the cold stillness of winter.

We gather as a congregation which has its summers – young people in the full bloom of youthful energy and exuberance, strong and healthy – G-d bless them - and eager to set out to conquer life’s mountains; and middle-aged and older people are here in abundant numbers as well – people who find their health, their energy – and may G-d have mercy on us all – their loved ones falling away from them – from us – like autumn leaves; people who can’t deny, as a young person might, that soon the leaf of their own lives will be blown from life’s tree.

It is not by chance that Judaism has placed this most solemn season, these ten days of introspection, at precisely this point in the year, at this time when, young and old, we are called together to ask the most basic questions of our lives, to search for meaning and purpose, to ask if we are living up to the values we profess.

We ask these questions of ourselves against a backdrop of falling leaves, and we allow this autumnal mood to come to the fore and to set the tone for these Holy Days.

During the High Holy Days we do not evade death. We accept it. We highlight it. And we let it teach us how to live.

In the period before and during these solemn days it has become customary for us to visit the graves of our departed. In traditional synagogues many come to Yom Kippur services in kittles, the white robe-like garments that are also used as burial clothes for those who’ve died. Yom Kippur is one of the times when we recite Yizkor, the memorial service for our departed - for Sefardim it’s the only time; and many light a memorial candle as a remembrance of those who are no longer with us. Indeed a 16<sup>th</sup> century rabbi says it is as though each of us is preparing to enter the world of those who have departed and to spend the next 25 hours with them. And during the hours of Yom Kippur many people fast – they deny themselves food, and water, and physical intimacy, they don’t shave or bathe – in other words they act like dead people, needing no sustenance, facing the grave.

In our morning prayers we recognize that lives that end in the grave must struggle for meaning –

“What are we?” we ask

What is our life?

What is our goodness

And our vaunted strength?

Many of our works are vain

And our days like a passing shadow.”

At Yizkor we read,

Our days are like grass.

We shoot up like flowers that fade and die

As the chill wind passes over them.

And in the day time services of Yom Kippur we include a Martyrology service, and recall our ancestors who died at the hands of others throughout our history.

And on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur among the most solemn moments are the recitation of Unetaneh Tokef, in which we ask “Who will live and who will die...who by fire and who by water...?”

If we can understand why death plays so central a role in our most central holy days, we can understand not just the meaning of these days but a central message of Judaism as well.

As one scholar says, religion is our dual response to being alive, and having to die.

American culture denies death. We're still a young nation, and we extol the youthful and vigorous. The ill, the aged, the dying are hidden in institutions where they can't disturb our youthful dreams.

We have trouble enough talking about sex to our children, or teaching about it in school. Discussion about death we rarely attempt, and in ignoring it we abandon our children to cope alone with their fears.

In preparing this talk I looked at a book called *The Kids' Book About Death and Dying*, put together by youngsters in a Boston school. They remind us of the fears of children, and identified with the little girl who said, “When I hear of someone dying I feel very nervous and my knees turn to mush and butterflies start fluttering around my stomach.” They reject the evasions of the clergyman who tried to sweeten a funeral by saying, “Friends, Margaret has now crossed the holy bridge of life - isn't that wonderful?”

Our children deserve from us the effort to help confront their deepest fears, for if death is a daily reality to older folks, who might turn to the obituaries in the daily paper before the headlines or sports, it is a reality to young people too, a haunting, frightening and therefore suppressed reality. Younger people, some say, are drawn to horror movies to help them conquer the upsetting thought of their own deaths, and that of their loved ones, which lurks in their souls.

Looked at this way, it is hard to see anything positive in our awareness of the dying of others and in the anticipation we suppress of our own future deaths.

“Cursed is man,” one rabbi in the Talmud says, “Cursed is man that he must die. Double cursed in that it has been made known to him that he must die.”

Woody Allen expresses the same idea more amusingly. “It's not that I'm afraid to die,” he says. “I just don't want to be there when it happens.”

He also says, “I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.”

The view of the the Talmudic rabbi is not Judaism's last word on the subject. If it was, death wouldn't be woven so deeply into the ritual and symbolism of these Holy Days. We would avoid it. We wouldn't want to think about it at all. But we don't avoid it. We do think about it, and we do try to learn lessons for life, seen against the backdrop of our own and our loved ones – inescapable inevitable deaths.

Judaism takes us down into the “valley of the shadow of death” in order to show us how to live there “and fear no evil.” We don't romanticize death, though we know it can bring relief from pain and weary toil; we know the mourners suffer, but the dead find peace. We don't welcome death, but when it must come, we face it squarely and accept

it. We look it in the face, we learn from it, and move on – back into life. Though we have a theology of the afterlife it is not a heavily emphasized central part of our faith.

Indeed, to focus on the rewards that come to the righteous beyond the grave is considered unworthy. Just as lovers do not try to make each other happy in order to gain some reward at the end of the day, so we do not try to please God in order to be rewarded for it, but only because we believe it is good and right to do so. “The reward of a mitzvah,” we say, “is the mitzvah.” The deed is its own reward. “Do not be like a servant who serves his master in order to receive a reward.”

It is not the afterlife – it’s punishments and rewards – that is our focus, but the end of living that precedes our journey there. It is living in the “valley of the shadow of death” that concerns us, not what happens on the far side of that valley.

We often hear of people who recover from serious illness or injury and who tell us they now see what’s really important in life, and regret the years they wasted on frivolous things.

In the Talmud we read that R. Eliezer taught, “repent one day before your death.” His disciples asked: “How can one know which day that will be?” “Precisely!” he replied. “repent today, therefore, in case you should die tomorrow. Thus will you spend all your days wisely/”

Christopher Leach, a British novelist, wrote a powerful book of reflection when his 11 year old son died suddenly. It is full of agony, but also has this to say:

Death can enrich us. We can live for those who have gone. We can pack into our lives that extra time the dead have given us. For they have given us time: the expanded moment that comes when we realize that, for us, the blood still moves, the world is still there to be explored and made over; that for now, this minute, this hour, this day, we are free of pain and hunger; that, though we still mourn in the deepest part of our being, death has liberated us, has made us see the transitory nature of everything; and life, being transitory, is thus infinitely more precious; commanding more attention than ever we gave it when we went on our way, still unthinking children, before death opened our minds, sharpened our eyes, and set us free.

The way in which one thinks of death is a reflection of the way one lives. Rabbi Harold Kushner, the well-known author of the best-selling Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People, tells us that “he was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children playing in the sand. They were hard at work, building a sand castle, with gates and towers and moats. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a wave came along and knocked it down”. He expected them to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised him. Instead, they ran up the shore, laughing and holding hands and sat down to build another castle.

He realized that they had taught him an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures that we spend so much time and energy building, are built on sand. Sooner or later a wave may come along and knock down what we had worked so hard to build up. What lasted for those children was their love for each other. As long as they had that, they would build, and let the waves do the inevitable. They built knowing that waves come, yet knowing that their friendship and delight in each other was stronger than any wave. Our lives too, says Kushner, are full of sandcastles. It is our ability to love and our devotion beyond ourselves that allows us to

accept each disappearance, even that of our own selves, for self-preservation is not first in our eyes.

For Rabbi Eliezer, death teaches us to use our time well, for we may have no tomorrow.

For Leach, death's lesson is how transitory life is, and therefore how much we must cherish our own lives – and the lives of our loved ones – for we don't know how much longer they'll be at our side.

For Kushner, if we are to survive life's waves it must be because we have devoted our lives to more than sandcastles. We need the love of others to help us survive the losses that death brings – friends and family and community to hold us and help us go on – and we need to know that what we care about will continue beyond our own demise.

The psychologist Victor Frankl, a concentration camp inmate, found that those of his fellow inmates who did best – who had the best chance of surviving – were those whose world had not crashed down upon them. If they had something beyond the present tragedy to dream about – to want to build when and if they'd survive – a family to gather and heal – a Jewish homeland to build – a socialist utopia to create – maybe, just maybe, they'd have the strength to survive. And if they didn't, they'd find comfort in knowing that when they still could they had fought for a grand ideal – and that the ideal, the vision, the dream would survive and others would come along and carry it on. They had played their part – been links in a great chain – and that would give them comfort as they died. That can comfort each of us as well – we've been perhaps links in a family's biological chain, as in the Jewish people's religions and cultural chain, we've built and sustained a synagogue, a more just society, a more liberated world. A life lived with meaning and joy can be celebrated even when it is short.

I was at a funeral once – the man had died in his fifties in an accident – and one of the eulogists spoke of how unfair it was for him to die so young. I left feeling that if I died at his age – I wasn't much older – I would not want anyone to say at my funeral that my death was unfair, as if death had cheated me out of something I was entitled to. I prefer to think of myself as having been invited to a wonderful party – a surprise invitation, out of the blue. I attend and enjoy myself, but early in the evening a call comes and I need to excuse myself and leave early. Was I entitled to be there till the last minute? I'd rather say that every minute I was there was a treat, and though I'm sad to leave, it was wonderful party. I'd prefer to hug my host and say “thank you” at the door.

I think that those die best who have lived well, and have the fewest regrets. If you go to a party, never dance, never talk to anyone, stay in the corner all night waiting for the right time to move out and begin to participate, then you get the call to leave, you might well feel angry for all the opportunities that were missed. But if you enjoyed the time there, participated, mingled and helped out, and didn't just let the minutes slip by, and then must leave, I think you'll leave easier, feeling good about the evening, knowing that your limited time wasn't wasted, and you did what you should.

I'm healthy, my family is healthy, we have a roof over our heads, and food on our table. I know there are many for whom the party isn't so grand. Even they, one hopes, can find joy in life, can name their blessings, and can bless the lives of others. Judaism encourages us all to be aware of our blessings starting with the very fact of our awakening this morning to one more day of life. Even the poor are encouraged to give tzedaka so they too will realize they have something to give.

The famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung has written “Among all my patients in the second half of life, there has not been one whose problem in the final analysis, was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one...fell ill because he lost that which the living religions of every age have given their followers, and none...has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.”

One who had such a religious outlook was the Hasidic Rebbe Simcha Bunam, who, as he lay dying, comforted his weeping wife by saying “Do not cry; my whole life was only that I might learn how to die.”

I would like to suggest that much of our ceremony and liturgy on these High Holy Days is only so that we will learn how to die. We don't celebrate death in Judaism. We don't welcome it. We change our names, wear protective amulets, knock on wood to chase the *malach hamaves* – the angel of death – from our doors. We confront death, we defy death, we do all we can to ward it off. Through our acts of charity and mercy, through our work for social justice and for peace, we rein death in and break its teeth. We fight because we know It's there – we make ourselves see it - through kittles and fasting and memorial candles, and through Unetaneh Tokef and Yizkor and Martyrology – we make sure we know it's there.

And we ask ourselves – what are we going to do about it? And we answer – I'm going to love my family and my friends - I'm going to love myself and my life - I'm going to fight for great causes and build a better world.

We are all leaves on the tree of life, and as such each of us has a role. Each leaf strengthens the tree, converting sunlight to energy, adding to the wellbeing of the whole. Yet any individual leaf may also block others from receiving the sunlight and add little to the benefit of the tree. If leaves were conscious, perhaps in autumn they too would be asked what role they had played in strengthening the tree, and making it fit for a new generation.

In this time of falling leaves, let us be at peace with whatever life brings. As we choose life and defend it, we accept that death, too, will have its season. Facing death, looking at it squarely, we commit ourselves to that which defies and transcends death: to love, to sharing the blessings of life with the needy, to fighting for the oppressed, to building a better world for Jews and all people, to lighting our candles against darkness and despair. Looking at death we'll value our companions in life all the more, cherish the true pleasures and gifts of life, and fulfill the vision of the poet, who said,

I think that the dying pray at the last  
Not please  
But “thank you”  
As a guest thanks his host at the door.  
Falling from mountains  
The people are crying  
“thank you”  
“thank you”  
All down the air,  
While the cold carriages  
Draw up for them on the rocks” – Annie Dillard