

Kol Nidre
2014 – 5775
Rabbi Louis Feldstein – Congregation B'nai Israel

Get busy living, or get busy dying

Two buddies, Bob and Earl, were very big baseball fans. They attended every game they could; and spent their entire adult lives discussing baseball history. During the winter months, they analyzed every box score made during the baseball season. They even agreed that whoever died first, they would try to come back and tell the other if there was baseball in heaven.

One night, Bob passed away in his sleep. A few nights later, his buddy, Earl, awoke to the sound of Bob's voice from beyond.

"Bob is that you?" Earl asked. "Of course, it's me," Bob replied. "This is unbelievable!" Earl exclaimed. "So tell me, is there baseball in heaven?" "Well, I have some good news and some bad news for you. Which do you want to hear first?" "Tell me the good news first." "Well, the good news is that, yes, there is baseball in heaven, Earl." "Oh, that is wonderful! So what could possibly be the bad news?"

"You're pitching tomorrow night."

On Yom Kippur we confront head on the reality of facing our deaths, and the examination of our destinies. The Book of Life is still open today, while the question lingers, "who shall live, and who shall die."

Yom Kippur is the only Jewish holiday in which we focus on death. On this sacred and solemn day we rehearse death. You all know the old joke about Jewish holidays. The tried to kill us, we won, let's eat. On Yom Kippur it is the complete opposite. God judges us, we may die, let's fast.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein teaches us, "Today, we remove our jewelry and finery, our fashionable clothes, our polished, comfortable shoes, some don a *kittel* — a death shroud literally wearing what we'll be buried in. Over and again, we will recite Vidui, the confession, just as one does before death. Over and again, we will chant the chilling words of *Unetaneh Tokef*: Who will live and who will die; Who at their time, and who before their time; who by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by earthquake and who by plague. "

"The temptation is overwhelming to think that prayer is talking about someone else", he continues. "Who will die? Not me. Maybe the fellow snoozing in the next row, but not me. Death is the deepest taboo in human consciousness. We martial enormous psychic energy to push away the reality of our finitude, that each one of us will one day meet death. But we pay an enormous price for that denial."

The greatest of people accept this gift of mortality as the bittersweet part of being human and use their limited lifespan to discover and attain their individual destiny. The weakest reject and fear this gift and spend their time denying its reality, or in some instances fighting against it (Greg Harvey)

Yom Kippur helps us overcome this denial, because death teaches us something important about life. The Psalmist prayed: “Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Feinstein teaches “Confronting the reality of death forces us to give up all the rationalizations, the excuses, the defenses, the self-deception that keep us from filling our days with life — from pursuing our dreams, reaching for our ideals, deepening our relationships, cherishing sacred moments. Knowledge of death is the ultimate solvent. The harsh truth that no one has an infinite number of tomorrows dissolves away all that obscures our vision of what really matters in life, and how we have repeatedly been distracted and drawn astray, how we have been negligent, oblivious, evasive, and foolish. It’s painful. But it allows us to begin again — to correct the patterns of self-destructive behavior, to loosen the lies that bind us, to apologize and make repair what we’ve broken. Today, we confront death so that tomorrow, we might begin a life renewed.”

Many of you know the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*. It is probably on somewhere, at least once a day. The movie is based on a Stephen King short story. In the movie, Tim Robbins plays the protagonist, Andy Dufresene, an innocent man serving life for murdering his wife. Prison is not easy on him. He is raped, assaulted and beaten. After years of this abuse something snaps and he begins to think about a new future – a future away from prison. Later in the movie he shared this vision with his friend, Red, played by Morgan Freeman. Red warns him that it is dangerous to dream and hope in a place like prison. Andy rejects this and begins to share his vision. It is a small beach in Mexico where one can see the stars, touch the sand and walk in the ocean.

Red is so upset and disturbed by the vision of freedom that he admonishes him to stop dreaming because it will only kill him. To which Andy responds, in one of the great lines ever, “It comes down to a simple choice. Get busy living, or get busy dying.”

If you knew that tomorrow was your last day, what would you do differently?

There is a Persian fable of the man who sends his servant to the market. A half hour later, the servant comes back, pale and agitated. He tells the master “I saw the angel of death in the market. He looked at me, looked at his list, and looked at me again. He’s come for me. I’m going to run away. I’ll run to the big city of Samarra. He’ll never find me there.”

The man now has to do his own marketing. He goes to town and sure enough, sees the angel of death. He asks him “Why did you frighten my servant?”

The angel of death answers “I didn’t mean to frighten him. I was just surprised to see him here. I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

You cannot escape your fate.

In the sixties there was a great saying, “Today is the first day of the rest of our lives” Yom Kippur, repositions the statement. “Today may be the last day of your life. How did you live yesterday, and if tomorrow is a new day, how will you live tomorrow.”

My colleague, in Tucson, Rabbi Tom Louchheim, spoke on Rosh Hashanah, on this topic. In his sermon he mentioned a very curious website, www.deathclock.com, a site that tells you the exact moment of your death. Interesting question, if you knew the moment of your death, would you do anything differently.

I visited the site, and entered my data... day of birth, month of birth, year of birth, sex, whether I am optimistic, pessimistic or normal, my BMI, and hit the tab for “check your death clock” I put optimistic (remember blessings, and gam zu l’tovah). I learned, that I will die on November 16, 2053 that was 1,234,676,601 seconds away a few days ago. I will be 96. Out of curiosity, instead of optimistic, I put normal. My days on earth plummeted to September 27, 2031. I will be 74. Knowing this information, I don’t know if I would do anything differently other than investing more in my 401K, although it is important to note that, on this shorter calendar my date of death was Yom Kippur (so I guess even then I can be an optimist - one less sermon to write).

Do I fear this? No. Am I paralyzed by it? No. Ultimately, just as I deal with Yom Kippur, I have a choice. I can be busy dying, or I can be busy living. The Torah teaches us in tomorrow morning’s reading, u’v’charta b’hayyim. Chose Life.

But knowing death approaches, does raise certain challenges. It truly does challenge us to ask, how I should live?

Now that I know exactly how much time I have left, what do I do with it? How do I plan for the rest of my life? Despite our clock, our tradition calls us to greet this moment with a blessing:

Praised are You Adonai, our God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this season.

“Yes, we will all experience the same end – death. But what are we to do with the time in between? Rabbi Eliezer (two thousand years ago) said, “Repent one day before your death.” His disciples asked, “How can one know which day that will be?” (At the time there was no [deathclock.com](http://www.deathclock.com)!) “Precisely,” he replied. “Repent today, therefore, in case you should die tomorrow. Thus will you spend your days wisely.”

“As we celebrate a New Year once again, 5775, we can choose to live your lives wisely. We can choose those values that reflect kindness, love, caring and compassion, because they make a positive difference. You should never give up hope. The greatest sin is despair. Despite the

prejudice and oppression and persecution in the world, you should never despair. Despair leads to hopelessness and hopelessness leads to inaction, doing nothing. The homeless can be housed. Barriers can be broken down. Power can be used for something constructive. Rifts among family members can be mended. Your participation is necessary for those things to happen.”

When do I start? Perhaps I can do it tomorrow. But tomorrow may never come or tomorrows stack on tomorrows and you may never face the Truth. At *shivah* services we read, “All things pass; all that lives must die. All that we prize is but lent to us, and the time comes when we must surrender it. We are travelers on the same road that leads to the same end.”

I came across the following in a sermon by Rabbi David Fass, “*Our attitudes towards death tell us a great deal about our attitudes towards life. What do we Jews think is the truth about death? At best, man’s life is short. His life may be kind or harsh, easy or difficult, but the time passes before he realizes it. An old person wants to live no less than a young person. **The years of life do not satisfy the hunger for life.** What then shall we do during this time?*”

In answer to this, we have two perspectives. “The first is that since life is so short we should enjoy it as much as possible. The second is that precisely because life is short and no one can completely enjoy it (for we die with half our desires unsatisfied), therefore we should dedicate life to a sacred and worthy goal, to sacrifice it for something which will be valued above life. At times the first feeling is stronger and at others the second one. Of late, however, I think that the second feeling is dominant. It seems that I am slowly coming to the conclusion that life by itself is worth little unless it serves something greater than itself.”

Eldad Pan wrote the aforementioned. He was an Israeli soldier, a veteran of many battles. He died in 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence and wrote this just before he died. At the time of his death he was twenty years old.

A story by Y.L. Peretz entitled, “Beside the Dying,” tells about a man who is lying on his deathbed. He is visited by an angel who is to carry him to heaven as soon as his last breath expires. Sensing the angel’s presence, the fever-stricken man asks, “And what is life like up there in heaven, in paradise? What shall I be doing there?”

The angel answers, “You won’t have to do anything. There is eternal rest there, everlasting joy, and enduring happiness.”

Concerned, the man turns toward the angel. “Is anyone there whom I can help? Can I raise up the dejected, heal the sick, feed the hungry, or give water to parched lips?”

“No,” the angel replies, “no one will need your help there.”

Distraught, the man says, “Where there is no one who needs my soul, my heart, my tear of pity, my word of comfort, or my hand to lift them up, there is nothing for me to do.”

And he refuses to go with the angel. Instead he asks if he could be reassigned.

Dan Gottlieb, Ph.D. writes a blog, **Broken lives and open hearts** about surviving life's turmoils. 34 years ago, he had an accident that resulted in his becoming quadriplegic. Since then he has been reflecting about how life happens and then unfolds.

He writes, *"It was a clear crisp December morning when I kissed my wife and precious little girls goodbye and walked across the frozen grass to climb into my burgundy Dodge dart (okay, everybody makes mistakes!)."*

Little did I know those would be the last steps I would ever take. Little did I know that would be the last time I would pick my daughters up over my head and watch them giggle. Little did I know it would be the last time I would stand up and gaze into my wife's eyes when I hugged her.

It was a day many things died. And they died the moment a truck tire bounced across the Pennsylvania Turnpike and crushed my car. Several months later as I sat in the occupational therapy department in Philadelphia, I glanced up at the pale green cinderblock wall with paint stains on it and muttered to no one in particular: "who would've thought that I would come to a place like this to die?" My poor OT became very distressed and quickly reassured me that I didn't come here to die, I came here to learn to live.

"Someone told me last week", he writes in another column, "that given my age (67), and the number of years I've lived as a quadriplegic (33), my life expectancy was about seven years! I immediately called my financial advisor and said "Remember how you told me last year that the way things looked now I might run out of money by the time I was 80? Well, I have great news. I just found out that I will probably be dead by the time I'm 73, so I don't have to worry about that anymore!"

"Like many of us", he continues, "I have come close to death several times. And like many of us, it can be ever-present background noise in our lives, and the lives of those who love us. So what to do with all of this death stuff?"

On Yom Kippur, we confront death and behave as if we are dead.

The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig taught that on Yom Kippur, the Jew is given the unique opportunity to see his or her life through the eyes of eternity. From the vantage of eternity, what in my life matters? What is real? What is important? What is valuable? And what, from eternity's perspective, are all the needless obsessions and worries that waste of my soul and sap my strength?

In a book by the late Rabbi Alan Lew, who was often called "The Zen Rabbi" because he drew from Buddhism, he goads us to do a rigorous self-inventory. The book, "[This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation](#)," is intense but motivating. He writes, *"The Book of Life and the Book of Death are opened once again, and your name is written in one of them. But you don't know which one. The ten days that follow are fraught with meaning and dread.... For the next twenty-four hours you rehearse your own death.*

...You neither eat nor drink nor fornicate. You summon the desperate strength of life's last moments.... 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.... Then a chill grips you. The gate between heaven and earth has suddenly begun to close.... 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."

Despite all our evasions, the truth is that we don't have an endless string of tomorrows. Life is finite. And life's finitude forces us to have priorities, and makes our choices important.

What priorities will you set, what choices will you make. You have a choice – it's time to get busy living.