

Yom Kippur 2018/5779

Today, I want to discuss a topic that concerns each and every one of us: death. Death is an inevitability that befalls each of us, yet few of us are prepared for it, and many of us fear it greatly.

It was Mark Twain, a passer through Buffalo, who said, “The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.” But it was Woody Allen who said: “I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

I suppose because I just turned 60 that someone from the organization that oversees my retirement benefits called me to help plan how I eventually wanted these funds to be used. His first question was, “when do you plan to retire?” This, of course is a fair question because he oversees my retirement funds! I responded that I hadn’t really given thought about retiring, to which he astutely replied, “you probably didn’t plan on dying either.”

So many of us put off thoughts about our life’s impermanence, either out of laziness or more likely, fear.

The Buddhists believe that our suffering is based on our failure to accept our impermanence. To a truly enlightened Buddhist, the death of a loved one is part of karma, a cosmic fate that just allows that person to become recreated as another life form in the future. There is something to this concept: that our bodies are made up of carbon molecules of other things we eat, carbon which originally made up our earth and all that is on it from

cosmic stardust, and that our souls are part of an equivalent, recycling source of some carbon-equivalent component. But in my mind, this seems not to be enough of an explanation, because as Jews, we focus on the individual, their special worth, and the unique Divine spark within them. Even if you accept that all life is impermanent, when someone we know dies, we mourn a specific loss- a loss of love, companionship, laughter, shared travail. And we mourn the loss of a special community. Who among us has not opened the Buffalo News Obituary section to scan for names next to those Stars of David: do we know that name, if not, we scan further into the text: do we know members of their family? And then it's: Oh my G-d, so-and so's mother just passed away. Why do we do this? It is because we as Jews have been inculcated with such a strong sense of community; not mere tribalism, but a real sense that there is a bond between us that we all require to exist. Our sages were smart to make sure that, in order for any one of us to mourn, to say the kaddish prayer, we would need 10 members of our community, a minyan. At the Shiva, it is the community who is obligated to provide food for the mourning family, lest they, in their grief, forget to eat and then become ill.

Mourning happens for us as a community, but even if we are surrounded by loved ones on our death bed, death is an individual endeavor that none of us can escape. Why then are we so fearful? Is it because we cannot fathom losing our bonds to people we love, with the everyday delights we get from wonderful food, a special wine, a shared laugh, a tender touch, hearing beautiful music or the cooing of a newborn child? Or is it because we have expectations of accomplishments we have not yet realized, bucket list of

things we want to produce, places we want to see, things we want to do?
Would death be easier for any of us if we had just climbed Mount Everest or bungee-jumped off a bridge in the Grand Canyon?

If our fear of dying is based on missing these wonderments of life or not yet accomplishing specific things, then what better time than today to start thinking about what each of us, you and I want out of this rare gift, this life, we have been given? The *U'netanah Tokef* prayer is nothing less than a clarion call, a shofar blast, that we recite each High Holidays to remind us of our immortality. We are admonished to listen for that still small voice in each of us, that *kol dimmamah dakah*, that connects our sentient, living body to our souls, so that we can find within us what is truly important for each of us in the year to come: who do we want to love, what do we want to do, who do we want to become. Lest we think that this is something we can keep putting off, we read:

On Rosh Hashana their decree is inscribed, **תְּבוּיֵי הַשָּׁנָה בְּרֹאשׁ**
and on Yom Kippur it is sealed **יִחְתְּמוּן כְּפוּר צוֹם וּבְיוֹם**
how many will pass away
and how many will be created,
who will live and who will die;
who will come to his timely end,
and who to an untimely end;
who will perish by fire and who by water;
who by the sword and who by beast;
who by hunger and who by thirst;
who by earthquake and who by the plague;

who by strangling and who by stoning;
who will be at rest
and who will wander about;
who will have serenity
and who will be confused;
who will be tranquil
and who will be tormented;
who will become poor
and who will become wealthy;
who will be brought to a low state
and who will be uplifted.

We are then told that **וְיִצְדָּקָה וְיִתְפַּלֵּה וְיִתְשׁוּבָה** Repentance, prayer and charity are the means to annul any evil decree against us.

My friends, there is no better time than now to start to think about what we want out of our lives. If the fear of death means not have accomplished what we wanted, now is the time to develop those plans and then to act on them. We each have been given a gift of life; it is for each of us not to take this gift for granted and thus, to live our lives to the fullest, not just for ourselves, but for our loved ones and our communities. As we now recite the *Tizkor* service, we celebrate the gifts of those lives shared with us, the love they gave us, their nurturing, their mentoring. We celebrate how our lives were made all the better for having them share our travels.