

YOM KIPPUR 5775
YOM KIPPUR: A REALITY CHECK
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Almost three weeks ago, I traveled to Toronto for a day and a half for two purposes. My first reason was to spend some time with my family – to see my sister, brothers-in-law, mother-in-law, and the rest of the family. The second reason was to visit Kever Avot, to spend some time at the graves of my ancestors before the High Holy Day season. This is a traditional activity at this period of time when memory is so important and we resolve to do better in the coming year. The concept of Zekhut Avot, the merit of the ancestors, is invoked often in our liturgy. In most cases, it refers to our patriarchs and matriarchs, those of ancient times. However, it is not uncommon to rely upon the merit of those closest to our own lifetimes and to appreciate their continuing role in our present lives.

After spending the evening with my family, the next day, along with my sister and some other members of my family, I visited four different cemeteries. Most of the graves visited were those of my immediate family, some of them were those of Bryna's. We both have large families in Toronto and our family histories go back a long way. I spent most of my time in Jones Avenue Cemetery, one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Toronto, where almost my entire father's side of the family is buried. After paying respect at the graves of my four great grandparents, as well as those of my grandparents, their siblings, and my uncles and aunts, I stood at the graves of my parents. My Dad died two days after Simchat Torah in 2003 and my Mother on the second night of Pesach in 2006. Though the years have passed, I think of them often and, in particular, when it comes to the holiday season. Even though I did not live in the same city in which they resided for many years, we remained close throughout their lifetimes.

Next to the graves of my parents is an open space. As is the current plan, both Bryna and I will lie there someday, hopefully after 120 years. As I read the inscriptions on my parents' stones, thoughtfully chosen by their children and their mates, I wondered what would be on my stone. You see, I understand only too well, that my days on this earth are numbered. I don't know how many days I have, and, frankly neither do you. Perhaps it is on Yom Kippur, more than any other time during the year, that we recognize this to be a truth from which we cannot hide.

Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for a future event. When the Bible instructs us, "You must deny yourselves," the Rabbis understood that statement to mean that we partake of nothing physical for a 25 hour period. We do not eat or drink, do not wash our bodies, do not anoint ourselves with creams and cosmetics, do not engage in marital relations, or wear leather shoes. On Yom Kippur we confront death. We rehearse death. With the denial of the physical we concentrate on the spiritual. Even the dress for the day reminds us of death. As you can see from what I am wearing, tradition dictates the wearing of a kittel on Yom Kippur, which is very much like the shroud that we will wear when we are lovingly prepared for our burial by the Hevra Kaddisha. All men are buried with a Tallit, and I am sure more women, if they wear them throughout their lives, will be buried that way in the future. Perhaps, it may be the Tallit I am wearing right now that I will wear at that time as well.

While this may seem quite morbid, I do not feel it to be so. Instead, it is an honest view of life, of the recognition that all that is physical will one day come to an end, and all that will be left is the spirit. Yom Kippur and its rituals force us to come to grips with the ultimate reality. As the prayer, U'Natane Tokef asks rhetorically: "Who will live and who will die?" None of us know the answer to that question and I believe it is one of the reasons that we are here in the synagogue today - to pray that we can recite the very same words next year. To seriously confront death can actually be cleansing. In the face of death, all the rationalizations, all the excuses, all the defenses fall away and we are forced to see who we really are.

This realization brings us to moments of ultimate clarity. As our prayers on Yom Kippur state: "What are we? What is our life? Our goodness? Our righteousness? Our achievements? Our power? Our strength? Our victories? What shall we say in Your presence, Adonai our G-d and G-d of our ancestors?" When we utter these words with deep sincerity we recognize our lot. G-d is eternal and we are not. Our lives are finite and mortality is part of the human experience. When we face this reality, and we do on Yom Kippur, we are left with the question: How are we going to live our limited days on the face of this earth?

On June 12, 2005, Steve Jobs delivered the commencement address at Stanford University. Jobs, a year earlier, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was told to go home and get his affairs in order. Thankfully, he found out that this rare form of pancreatic cancer was curable with surgery and after successful surgery on that date in 2005, he felt he was cured. We know that a few years later, in 2011, he was dead of cancer.

On that day he spoke realistically to the graduating seniors. He said to them: "Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool that I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked and there is no reason not to follow your heart."

He continued later in his address: "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true."

In the face of this stark reality, Steve Jobs challenges me to ask myself the following question: How am I spending my life? What am I doing with my days on this earth? How do I want others to remember me? What do I want to have written on my tombstone?

In her book *Happier Endings – A Meditation on Life and Death*, Dr. Erica Brown describes a special practice at a kibbutz in the north of Israel, Beit Hashita. This secular kibbutz wanted to memorialize the dead who were kibbutz members, so they inspired their membership to give more thought to last words, to help people remember them after they are gone. They

created a “Memorial Room” at the center of the kibbutz. The kibbutz decided to help its extended family preserve their personal memories for those after them. Each member of the kibbutz was allotted a drawer in the Memorial Room to preserve important documents and memories that he or she would like to archive for future generations. “The death drawer,” she writes, “is your own. You pick what you would like to put inside.” This very much reminds us of the scene in the U’Natane Tokef prayer when the author describes the book that G-d reads about our life as we acknowledge that its words upon the page are authored by each and every one of us.

What do you want to place in your memorial drawer? What items do you want people to remember about you? What lessons should people derive from the life that you live, the words that you say, the actions you perform, and the legacy you leave behind? It’s not only told in the few words on the inscription on your tombstone; it is inscribed on the souls and in the minds of those who follow you.

This summer was the 20th anniversary of the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. This anniversary of his death allowed for a number of testimonials to his leadership in the Jewish world. It also brought forth a number of books on his legacy. One of them was written by Joseph Telushkin simply entitled *Rebbe*. Telushkin attempts to reconstruct the Rebbe’s life by speaking to many people and hearing the stories of their personal encounters with the Rebbe. In one case, he describes a meeting between the Rebbe and a woman who had been suffering tragedies in her life. The Rebbe attempted to offer some consolation. He explained to her, according to Telushkin, that the death of the physical body does not mean the total annihilation of the deceased. “All believers in G-d,” he remarked, “believe also in the survival of the soul,” and the soul can in no way be affected by the death and disintegration of the physical body. The Rebbe added this example: “If you take a piece of paper and you burn it with a match, ashes are going to remain. It’s not going to be totally destroyed, something will remain. And the same thing is with the human being... something that exists cannot be totally destroyed.”

He told her that the most immediate pain we feel when a loved one dies is the deep sorrow that we can no longer touch, hold, hug, or converse, with the deceased. But if the most important attachment we have with those we love is to the quality of the person’s soul, “including such spiritual things as character, kindness, goodness, all of which are attributes of the soul, and not of the body,” the devastation will not be as acute. To focus on the spiritual, the Rebbe stated, enables us to bring joy and benefit to the soul even after our loved one is no longer physically here. In other words, even after the body dies the relationship with another person continues because the soul is still alive.

What then will be our legacy? How will people remember us? Will they be able to attach themselves to our living souls and be consoled in the process of their grief as they recall our lives? When they open up that drawer in our memorial room, what documents will they find? Will it simply be stocks and bonds, a ledger of our financial well-being? Will it be our bio detailing where we received our education degrees, what jobs we held, what positions of honor were ours? Or will the documents also show us to be caring, compassionate human beings, considerate and helpful to those whom we loved and the strangers in our midst? Will the

archives show that we used our intellect, our G-d-given talents, our financial means, to better the lives of those around us, and humanity as a whole? Will the stories of our legacy impress those who follow us to attempt to model their lives after ours, to pattern their behavior after us? Will we continue to serve as an example to our children and grandchildren, our nephews and nieces, our co-workers and employees even after our physical demise has occurred? Will the documents show a life well lived, or a life wasted?

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book *Living a Life That Matters* writes that the key to immortality, the reassurance that our lives have mattered is found in the work that we have done, the acts of kindness we have performed, the love we have given and the love we have received, the people who will smile when they remember us, and the children and grandchildren through whom our names and memory will be perpetuated.

Dr. Ron Wolfson of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles wrote a book entitled *The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven: Reviewing and Renewing Your Life on Earth*. Basing himself on a passage in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Shabbat 31a, he attempts to challenge us to measure the quality of our lives by asking us to concentrate on what is really important in life so that when our final day comes, we will be able to defend before G-d how we lived our lives and show that we accomplished our purpose here on earth. One of the questions he asks us to contemplate is: Are we a good ancestor? Do we transmit our values, beliefs, and culture from our generation to the next? Each of us, he states, is a teacher and as a teacher it is our task to inform the next generation of what is really important, to model a lifestyle which they would want to emulate. Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Winston Churchill, upon being asked whose descendant he was, prophetically replied, "I am not a descendant; I am an ancestor." Zekhut Avot, the merit of the ancestors, is a concept that teaches us that a person is best able to advance on the road to moral perfection if he starts with the accumulated spiritual heritage of righteous ancestors. Are we those types of ancestors? Will those who are our descendants want to follow our path and direction?

I had the opportunity in the cemeteries in Toronto to revisit the legacy of my ancestors, to recognize their continuing influence upon me. I am the person I am because of my relationships with them. In me their souls become immortal. The visit also compelled me to wonder when my time comes whether my descendants will think highly of me and allow our relationship to impact their lives? It is a question each of us must confront not only on Yom Kippur, when we have this programmed rehearsal of death, but each day of our lives, for we don't know which will be our last one here on earth.

There is a story about the Chofetz Chaim, a renowned rabbi of the 19th century, who was summoned as a character witness before a secular court. The lawyer told tales of his learning and piety to impress the judge. When the judge questioned the veracity of the stories, the lawyer replied that while he could not vouch for the literal truth of all the tales, one thing he did know: "Your honor, they don't tell stories like that about you and me."

The answers to the great questions which confront all of us on Yom Kippur – Who are we? Why are we here? What is our task? - are answered by the stories of our lives and the narratives of the record of our days on earth. They are told in our drawers in the Memory

Room that will be bequeathed to the generations that follow us. They are evident in the book that we author by which G-d will judge us as our days draw to a close. They are encountered in the manner in which our soul is attached to those who recall our memories. They are exemplified in the lives we live and the manner in which our lives will then be emulated by those who follow us.

The rehearsal of death on Yom Kippur is not morbid at all. It reminds us of the reality of living. There will be an end to our existence on the face of this earth. When it occurs I pray that we will be remembered for goodness, for kindness, and for making this world a better place than we found it.