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L'chaim.

Hachayim yod'im sheyamutu. “The living know they will die.” So says the book of Ecclesiastes (9:5).

At this time of year, the season of Remembrance and Judgment, nothing separates us from the animals and the rest of God's creation as dramatically as this knowledge -- not our being created in God's image, not our sense of humor, not our civilization, not even our knowledge of right and wrong -- but the awareness of our own mortality.

Most of us probably don't think about death very often, except when, God forbid, it touches someone close to us. Unlike the rest of us, philosophers have been writing about mortality for thousands of years.

For Socrates, philosophy -- the art of living -- was really about the art of dying. To live well, he explained to his disciples on the eve of his drinking the fatal hemlock, is to be prepared for death. While his followers began to grieve and urge him to avoid his fate, he faced impending death resolutely. His composure rested on his belief that he had lived his life in preparation for meeting his death.

Fast-forwarding to the 20th Century, the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig began his major work of theology, *The Star of Redemption*, with the contemplation of death. Mortality, he believed, presents humanity with an existential ultimatum. No one can contemplate death and emerge unscathed; knowledge of mortality demands a reckoning of the meaning, value, and purpose of one's life. For Rosenzweig, the Torah and Jewish tradition define that purpose by building frames of meaning through which we can relate to God's presence and God's demands in our lives.

Psychologists also have much to say about death and mortality. In his book *The Doctor and the Soul*, Holocaust survivor and Austrian intellectual [Victor Frankl](#) explains:

How often we hear the argument that death does away with the meaning of life altogether. That in the end all man's works are meaningless, since death ultimately destroys them. Now, does death really decrease the meaningfulness of life? On the contrary. For what would our lives be like if they were not finite in time, but infinite? If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from now or ten years hence. But in the face of death as absolute *fnis* to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost...

Though there is a lot of wisdom in these thinkers' writing, it goes without saying that reading about mortality in a book and experiencing it are worlds apart. One of my earliest memories of death takes me back to the age of 13, six months after my Bar Mitzvah. My grandmother on my father's side, Grandma Lillie to me, was almost 82 years-old, in great shape and still as sharp as ever. While playing bridge with her friends, she started to complain of an unusually bad headache, and then she collapsed. By the time the ambulance arrived, Lillie had died from a massive stroke.

What struck my 13-year-old head and heart most about that experience was how my grandmother's friends reacted to it. They all said, one way or another, "That's how I want to go. 80-plus years, great health to the end, and then one day just gone. I don't want to linger."

What strikes my head and heart most now is that such a death would mean you wouldn't have time to ask forgiveness from an estranged friend, or accept the apology of a loved one, or make amends where a relationship was broken. You would have to have your accounts in order, not just financially but ethically, spiritually, and interpersonally as well.

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Like the philosophers and psychologists, the rabbis have thought about this, too. In Pirkei Avot (2:10) and the Talmud (BT Shabbat 153a), Rabbi Eliezer gives his students a cryptic piece of advice: *shuv yom echad lifnei mitatcha* -- "Repent one day before your death." His skeptical students ask rhetorically: "But does a person know on which day he will die?!" Eliezer was ready with his response: *v'chol sheken yashuv hayom shema yamut l'machar* -- "All the moreso, one should repent today lest he die tomorrow. Then all his days he will be found to be living in *teshuvva*." And when his last day comes, he will be ready.

A life lived in perpetual repentance -- would that mean always making amends for mistakes, accepting apologies, being merciful in forgiving, never letting conflicts fester? The Sages of the Talmud share a parable to help us understand Rabbi Eliezer's words [paraphrased/adapted]:

It is like a king who invited his servants to a banquet, but he did not set an exact time for them to arrive. The wise ones among them got dressed in appropriately formal clothing and sat waiting at the door of the palace, saying to themselves, "The king's banquet could be ready at any moment, and we must be properly attired in case we get called in suddenly!"

The foolish servants went about their work and kept wearing their regular everyday clothes. "A banquet takes time to prepare," they told themselves, "so we surely have time before the feast will be ready."

Suddenly the king summoned all the servants to the banquet. The wise ones entered, adorned in their dress clothes. The foolish ones entered before the king with their clothes soiled from their daily work.

To those who were suitably dressed for the banquet, the king bade them sit, eat, and drink. To those who had failed to adorn themselves for the banquet, the king said they would have to stand and watch the others partake. These are privileged to eat, while those must go hungry. These may drink, but those are doomed to thirst.

What would it mean for us to live everyday as if it were our last? Yom Kippur gives us a taste of what it would be like to take this lesson seriously.

You see, in the rituals of the Day of Atonement the reminders of mortality are pervasive. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer and others besiege us with images of God's Book of Life and Death, of who shall perish by water and who by fire. The fast gives us the sense of a withered body, freed as in death from the need for physical sustenance.

Earlier tonight the *Kol Nidrei* prayer asked for us to be absolved of vows we are unable to fulfill. Usually this is interpreted as an admission of our inevitable failure to live up to our word. But couldn't it also be meant as an acknowledgement of the possibility that -- God forbid -- our life might end before we can keep all our promises?

Moreover, when we stand before the ark for this prayer, we remove all the Torah scrolls. In that moment, the *aron kodesh* -- the holy ark -- without the holy *sifrei Torah* in it, becomes merely an *aron* -- which in Hebrew also means "coffin." And the traditional attire for Yom Kippur, the *kittel* or plain white robe, is also the traditional attire for burial. In effect, on Yom Kippur we stand together with the support of our community and look into our own grave.

In this light, the Day of Atonement feels like a rehearsal for the last day of our life. The effect could be despair, unless we can see this day as an unexpected gift: a God's-eye view of our life from its end.

One day a year, we stare death in the face. And it turns out that death's face is a mirror. When we stare into it, we get the opportunity to evaluate our lives as if from our last day. On that day, we will ask in the past tense what we are blessed today to ask in the present: are we living the life we should, the life we want, for ourselves and those around us? If this day were our last, what old wound would we try to heal, which broken promise would we try to keep, which loved ones would we remind how much we love them?

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It may be enough to enshroud ourselves in this heavy death imagery only one day each year. In fact, I happen to think that the rabbis behind the story of the wise and foolish banquet guests are a little too fixated on the World to Come and dismissive of the work of the World As It Is. Taken to the extreme, obsessing about the possibility of impending death might lead us to neglect our responsibilities in the here and now.

After all, Judaism is a religion of life, not death. Our tradition repeatedly urges us to "choose life" for ourselves and our children, as we will read in the Torah portion tomorrow

morning. The aim of our central sacred story, the Exodus, is not some otherworldly reward but a better *life* in the Land of Israel. The Talmud and our other Jewish law books spend hundreds of thousands of words on the details of *life* here in this world, from observing Shabbat and raising a child, to planting a field and running a business. Even the passages about death are essentially about how the living are to treat and memorialize the dead.

But Yom Kippur understands this, too. Again, there is great wisdom in our liturgy. As we finish the prayers for Yom Kippur tomorrow, the somber quiet of death is shattered by the sound of the shofar -- and not just any ordinary blast, but a *tekiah gedolah*.

A midrash explains that the shofar is a symbol of resurrection:

And how does the Holy One, blessed be He, resuscitate the dead in the world to come? We are taught that the Holy One, blessed be He, takes in His hand a Great Shofar . . . and blows it, and its sound goes from one end of the world to the other. (Midrash Aleph Beit D' Rabbi Akiba 3:31)

Here in the synagogue, we have our own Great Shofar -- actually several great shofars in very capable hands! -- and when they sound near the end of Yom Kippur tomorrow, we too will be jolted out of our pseudo-death, to life renewed. Looking back on our year, the good and the bad, we are called to resurrect the person we have been in our better moments. From the mire of mortality, each of us is reborn with the new year.

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When my fiancée and I get married -- God-willing -- next May, I will wear the ring that my Grandpa Al wore at his wedding. It was given to him by my Grandma Lillie with the following inscription: "LS [Lillie Streen] to AS [Al Segal] 1935." The same ring that sanctified their marriage 73 years ago will sanctify ours.

This symbolic ring will remind me of both sides of the coin of the human condition: you won't be around forever; but you sure can live with meaning while you're here. Lillie and Al managed to do it, and there's a ring and a lifetime of memories to show for it, not to mention children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

It makes sense that the *kittel* traditionally worn by the worshiper on Yom Kippur and by the deceased for burial is also worn by a groom on his wedding day. The awareness of mortality and the embrace of life's joyful passages are inextricably intertwined. We turn to the words of Ecclesiastes again:

Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun (9:9).

Again, two sides of the coin: our days are indeed fleeting, and yet there is happiness to be enjoyed. That nothing lasts forever need not entail that nothing has meaning, or impact, or lasting value.

During a recent summer internship as a hospital chaplain, I came across a pamphlet entitled *Helping a Child Grieve and Grow*. I relied on it several times during the summer to help bereaved parents support their grieving children. It said:

A wise writer once insisted that only death makes love possible. Because human life is fragile, it is precious. Because an individual makes but one appearance on this earth, his or her uniqueness must be cherished.

Do you really want to protect a child from discovering that truth?

I believe Yom Kippur brings us face-to-face with death precisely so we can discover or rediscover this truth. What feels like a curse at first turns out to be a blessing in disguise. For with the knowledge of death comes a new understanding of life: since it is finite, every moment counts. Since it is short, it is to be treasured.

And on Yom Kippur God gives us the chance to evaluate it and even to change it for the better. So we look back at what we could have done better and we look ahead with a prayer that we will have time under the sun to make it better this time around. The length of our days remains in God's hands, but the fullness of them depends on us.

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Only a few verses after Ecclesiastes reminds us, the living, that we know we will die, the text continues with one of its most famous statements: "Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy" (9:7a). And elsewhere, in other words, "Eat, drink, and be merry" (Eccl 8:15).

Of course, on the Day of Atonement there will be no eating or drinking. But this day of self-denial can help us live with more merriment during the year. Today we stare death in the face and endure a reckoning of the soul; tomorrow we come back to life wiser, more reflective, more appreciative. Today we fast in somber penitence; tomorrow we drink our wine in joy.

It is no accident that, when we drink wine in joy, we say *l'chaim* -- that we mark those occasions with a nod in the direction of life. Each moment of celebration is a life-embracing act.

And so we say:

l'chaim, to a new year of lessons learned from years past;

l'chaim, to letting mortality teach us how to embrace life;

l'chaim, to renewing our days in the richness and fullness of our better moments.

May we fill the pages of the Book of Life, from word to word, and line to line, with the chronicles of a life well-lived, so that when we come to the end and look back, we might be able to say, "That was worth reading."

G'mar chatimah tovah. L'chaim!