

DEALING WITH DEATH

A High Holiday Sermon - 5738-1977
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Recently, I attended a mass, a Catholic funeral service, for the Archbishop of our area, the Rev. Coleman Carroll. I had known the Archbishop rather well and had worked together with him on several community projects. Following the impressive funeral service, the new Archbishop, who officiated at the mass, told reporters that for Catholics this was not a day of mourning but a day of celebration, since Catholics had the faith that the deceased had entered Paradise. The Catholic way of dealing with death has its emphasis on the theological aspects of death. What is emphasized is the union of the soul with God, provided, of course, that the dead person had fulfilled the requirements of the Church.

Judaism attempts to handle the problem of death in a much different fashion. We also have our theological interpretation of death and what happens to the soul, but at the funeral service and during the prescribed mourning period following death, Judaism attempts to deal with the human aspects of death. Catholicism concentrates on theological rites. Judaism concentrates on human feelings.

While Judaism has long taught that the soul returns to God at death, Jewish mourning ceremonies do not stress this theological doctrine. What is stressed is the agony and the mystery of human separation. What our ceremonies try to deal with are sorrow and loneliness. In other words, Judaism directs its main attention to those who survive.

Even if we believe the soul of the departed to be at peace with God, Judaism does not regard death as a time for celebration. We set aside, instead, a full week for the ceremony of Shivah, where those who have lost a loved one are encouraged to sit at home while their friends come to commiserate with them. If you are angry, say so. If you feel guilty, say so. None of these feelings are considered to be anti-religious or opposed to religious practice. On the contrary, they are considered to be normal feelings and if they exist, as they do in most people, it is better for them to be expressed.

A Place For Anger

Psychologists tell us that it is not unusual for the mourner to experience anger at a time of death, either anger at the person who has died, or anger at himself. I have told you of my wife's eighty year old grandmother who was angry at God when one of her children died. As we left the chapel where the funeral service was held, this old woman looked up to the heavens, raised her fist to God, and said angrily, "Don't do it again!" In Judaism, this is not considered irreverence. This woman knew her God well enough to be angry at Him. Her faith was deep enough for her to give God another chance. Later on, in a week or in a month, she would be able to think about the fact that perhaps God did not willingly take her son, but for now, she was angry and needed to yell at someone. Why not yell at God? His shoulders are the broadest of all.

Contrast with this the case of a Catholic woman in Elmont, Long Island, the site of my first congregation. This woman had been unable to bear children, and for many years she trudged from one Catholic shrine to another, praying for a miracle - that she would be able to have a child. Seemingly, her wish was granted, and she had a truly unusual boy who grew up to be admired and loved by all. When he was eight years old, the boy died of a rare disease. The priest told the bereaved mother, "It is God's will. We must accept His will. He has another plan for your child beyond our understanding." The woman could not accept this answer. Like Job's wife, she renounced God and the Church, and became a bitter opponent of religion. About a year later, her neighbor, who happened to be a member of my congregation, urged her to talk to me, since the neighbor knew that I had a different understanding of God's role in such a situation. When the woman came to see me, I told her that I certainly did not have all the answers, but I rather imagined that when such a young and wonderful child dies, God Himself weeps. I said to her, "It is hard for me to think that God would desire the death of your child, and I suspect that His heart broke with yours." The woman was visibly relieved. She could understand an imperfect God. She could not understand a God who deliberately took the life of a small child. In time, she returned to her Church. She was able to pray again.

I want to make it clear that the answer of the priest was not merely a Catholic answer. It is also the answer that some traditional Rabbis give. It is not an answer with which I can live. I can believe in a God who is not all powerful and who does what He can to help those in need. I cannot accept a God who has the power to save the life of a wonderful human being and fails to do so. Being a Jew, and especially a Reform Jew, I am free to indulge in this heretical theology, so I believe in a God who shares our sorrows and grieves with us. After all, this is the kind of God who spoke to Moses out of the Burning Bush - when he said, "I have heard the cry of my people; I see their suffering; I know their pain."

In the Jewish house of mourning, we don't generally act as if death is a blessing. It is different, sometimes, when an older person dies. In that case, when the quality of life is so thin, death can be a blessing. My dear mother was 80 when she died and hardly able to walk with someone helping her. In her last days, she had a deep fear of being forced to live in a nursing home, which she imagined to be a place of horror. About the time we were prepared to talk about her need for daily care which only a good nursing home could provide, she passed away. It was as if she had written her own ticket out of this world. Even so, there is grief when an old person dies, when we think of the good times we had together and the contribution that person made to our well being. In such situations, the memories of old pleasures are intermingled with present grief, and we laugh and cry almost at the same time. This kind of talk appropriately takes place in the house of mourning.

Suppose, however, that it is a young person who dies; then, unless the disease is an incurable one, and usually even then, there is plenty of space for tears. Surely, the soul is with God, but it is not with us, and we are entitled to our feeling of loneliness. I will never forget the first funeral at which I officiated. A couple in my congregation had only one child, a 21 year old son. He was killed in an automobile accident. During the shivah period in the couple's home, I tried to shield the parents from the people who came in crying hysterically. A married couple in their young 30's came up to me and took me aside. "Look, Rabbi, they said, "You're young and inexperienced. Let us tell you something. Each of us

lost his first spouse. In each case, death came when we were very young after a few years of marriage. The only thing that saved us was our ability to cry; and the people who came in and cried with us helped the most."

Since then, I have had many experiences which confirm the importance of the sharing of sorrow during the mourning period immediately after a death. If you are filled with grief, it is important not to hide it. You should not pretend that nothing has happened. The psychologists tell us that grief, if bottled up in the present, will explode at some future time. How wise the ancient Rabbis were to establish a required period when mourners are to be at home and to acknowledge with their friends the great tragedy that has taken place!

Handling the Guilt

In ancient times at pagan funerals, it was not unusual for the relatives of the deceased to cut themselves with knives or to dismember themselves. This ancient practice supports the teaching of psychologists that those who survive have a sense of guilt that they are still living. The survivor imagines that the dead person is suffering, which he is not, so the survivor seeks to hurt himself, in the hope of equalizing the situation. Judaism teaches that while death is not a time for celebration, it is not the time for harming oneself, either. But the ancient Rabbis recognized the inner need of the survivor to identify with the deceased by hurting himself, so the Rabbis devised a ritual which is a sublimation of the pagan or instinctive practice. The Rabbis said, "Do not tear your body, tear your garment." In Biblical times, the custom developed in Judaism of tearing one's clothes at the time of a death. In modern times, we substitute a ribbon and say, "tear this ribbon." Reform Jews often are too sophisticated to follow this traditional practice. It is a practice, however, which I commend to you as being psychologically sound. Usually when the brief ceremony of tearing the ribbon is performed, there seems to me to be a healthy release of feeling.

When someone close to you dies, there is usually a feeling that a part of you has died also. If we are the parents, a part of our future seems to die with the child. If we are the children, a part of our supporting foundation seems to die with the parent. There is definitely a loss of ego when someone in the family dies. Judaism tries to recognize this fact and urges the mourner to move closer at this time to the rest of his family and to the Jewish community. The kaddish ceremony, which requires that the mourner come to the synagogue on a regular basis following a death, is based on this psychological truth. As the mourner says his kaddish along with others, he realizes that he is not alone in his sorrow and that he is a part of an ongoing community from which he can borrow strength. In Temple Beth Am, we offer the mourning family the option of having a service of mourning in their own home during the first few days of mourning. This is our way of saying, "You are not alone. We consider you part of our own family." Also, we read from our pulpit the name of the deceased every Friday night for the first month of mourning, and we maintain a *yahrzeit* board where the name of the deceased can be permanently recorded.

Judaism encourages mourning, but in measure. It encourages full mourning during the first seven days, moderate mourning during the first month, and then

suggests a gradual normalization of living until the time of the unveiling of the tombstone, a year after the death. The purpose of the unveiling ceremony is not to reopen old wounds, but to mark an end to the formal period of mourning. The key prayer in that brief ceremony is the 23rd Psalm which ends, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The mourner through the unveiling ceremony is asked to affirm the goodness of life and to seize those opportunities for happiness that life presents.

Some people, however, want to or need to hold on to their sorrow. They want to or need to be bitter. They seem to enjoy withdrawing into a corner. Judaism holds that this excessive need of mourning is inappropriate. While we encourage deep mourning at a time of death, we believe that continued mourning should not become a way of life. Such living, our tradition teaches, is a denial of God and a closing of one's eyes to life's opportunities. It is not easy, however, to redirect oneself towards new people when a loved one with whom we have lived closely for many years passes away. I know one woman whose husband was dead for a year and a half before she could talk about him in the past tense. Talking about him as if he were dead brought her such pain, she couldn't bear to do so. Such people sometimes need help either from their Rabbi or from someone psychologically oriented. There are techniques for releasing sorrow, and not all of us are able to use them equally well. Sometimes a terrible experience in our childhood makes it difficult for us to adjust to the death of a loved one when we grow older. When you have difficulty releasing your sorrow, you should make certain to reach out to others for help.

Death is a Part of Life

Now, you may have the thought in your mind, why in the world is the Rabbi talking about death now? Wouldn't it be better to talk about the future and about hope and about the way to solve our immediate problems? Of course, we would rather talk about other things, but it is important to learn that death is a part of life. We are born to die, and as the members of our congregation get older, more of us can be expected each year to pay this price for the privilege of living. The mature person will want to face the inevitable prospect of death, so that he can plan his life more meaningfully. Some of you will say, well, if I am going to die, I am going to live faster and harder. The problem with this solution is that we don't always live better or deeper by running around faster. The truth is that by accommodating oneself to the sure prospect of a future death, one can live with less anxiety, and you might decide to live more slowly and "to smell the flowers along the way."

For example, sometimes we think that if we fail at what is most important to us, the whole world will collapse. This isn't true, of course. In one way, our life is like a wave splashing on the seashore. When our wave is spent, the world will go on, and a thousand more waves will come along to take our place. Such a thought is deflating to our ego, but it is at least one-half of the truth. The success or failure of what we are trying to do is not quite as important as we think it is. If we can become more objective about what we are doing, chances are we will be more at peace and more content.

To think of the inevitability of death can also change the way we act towards those who are near to us. After all, our dear ones will not be here forever, nor will we. Now is our only chance to help those near to us who are in need. Yet a little while and they will be gone and beyond our help, even if we wished to do so. The thought of death can spur us on to say, "You know, I'm really sorry I acted the way I did", or "You know, I can't hide it any longer. I really love you."

Our Jewish tradition teaches, "Naked were we when we were born and naked shall we leave this world." In other words, we can't take our earthly treasures with us. The High Holy Day prayer book uses this image, "Like a child falling asleep over his toys, so is the person who dies still trying to acquire more and more things for himself." Death helps us to understand that all of our acquisitions are, after all, only toys, and they will not be of help to us in the world to come.

The contemplation of death ought to give us an extra field of perception. The truth is that our name lives on only in terms of what we add to the life of others. Our name lives on with our children and with the things that we give away - with the deeds that we do to enrich the lives of others and with the gifts that we contribute to make the lives of others easier and fuller.

Judaism does not belittle the significance of the world to come, but neither does it make the life after death seem to be the most important of all things. The Rabbis of the Talmudic period said it in this fashion, "Better is one hour in this world and one hour of good deeds than all the time of the world to come." But the Rabbis also said, "Better is one hour in the world to come than all the years in this world." Each world has its meaning and its place in Judaism, but this is the only world we know about and the only world we can do anything about.

On this Yom Kippur, when we attempt to confront our Maker in serious dialogue, let us think about the inevitability of our death and resolve to live in such a way that when that moment arrives, it will find us confident that we have made of this life what we could and what we should.