

WHAT DEATH CAN TEACH US?

A High Holiday Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, DHL, DD
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The High Holiday liturgy seeks to link present, past, and future. In each of our services, we recite the Ahlaynu prayer, which we sometimes call the Adoration. The Ahlaynu or Adoration is our messianic prayer through which we pledge ourselves to work towards the messianic day in the future, a time of universal peace and justice. The essence of Jewish teaching is that the present is a cross section of the past and the future, and the present is holy only insofar as it carries with it the seeds of the past and the dream of the future.

Rosh Ha-Shanah is called, amongst other things, "Yom Ha-Zikaron, the Day of Remembrance". In the Shofar Service, we are bidden to remember the Brit or Covenant made on Mt. Sinai and to become one with our people in its eternal contract with God. Throughout the holiday services, we are asked to recall the experiences of our people in all the lands of their sojourn, in their effort to create a world of meaning. On Yom Kippur, at the Yizkor Service, we are specifically asked to remember the dead, what they meant to us, and what they stood for.

There are other religions which have prayers for the dead, but most of these are concerned with appeasing the spirits of the dead who are assumed to have a certain malevolence. The holiday of Halloween originally was a pagan festival in which an attempt was made by means of special food offerings to convince the dead spirits to be friendly. From its beginnings, Judaism has eschewed any kind of magical rituals oriented towards the dead. Instead we have talked about the importance of linking together the generations in memory, so that the goals and inspiration of our parents and grandparents will not be lost.

Our modern generation has been called the "Now" generation in the sense that we tend to belittle the accomplishments of the past and to be concerned for the pleasures of the present without reference to the effect of our actions on the future. The Yizkor Service and the honor that it directs to our predecessors is a challenge to the blinkered vision of the Now generation.

The Yizkor Service is also a reminder that none of us is immortal. There will come a time, the service reads, when like those who have gone before us, we too will lay down to our eternal rest.

When you are young and energetic, it is hard to think about ever not being alive, but death is a reality that must ultimately be faced. At Yizkor we are not asked to think morbidly about death, but to think about it so that we will understand the true meaning of life. One message of the Yizkor Service is that life is only a brief interlude between non-being and death, therefore it is supremely precious. It must not be wasted. Life, say our sages, is a sacred but passing opportunity, a chance, soon taken from us, to do unusual things.

What is it that a living person can do that the dead cannot? Is breathing and eating the real distinction of human life, or is there something far more subtle and profound?

The quality that makes human life so precious is that we have the opportunity to love, to give and to receive affection. The Yizkor Service reminds us that we will not long have this opportunity. In the expanse of history, measured by the eons of our world, the years of an individual life, however many they may be, are like a brief second. Our life is like the flash of a meteor dashing across the sky of eternity.

In the tomorrow when each of us will die, we will no longer have the chance to tell someone that we appreciate what they have done for us. We will no longer have

the opportunity to apologize for a wrong we have done. Do that today, is the message of this service. In the tomorrow when we die, we will no longer have the chance to help those who are weaker than ourselves, or those less privileged than ourselves. If we are able to reach out and touch another life, we must do that today.

You have heard me describe the story of the carousel manager in the musical, "Carousel". Billy, the father of a young girl, died, and we are told that he went to heaven. In heaven, the keeper of the stars asked him, "What would you do if you had the chance to return to earth and to do one more deed?" Billy's face lit up at that thought, and he said to the star-keeper, "I love my young daughter dearly, but I have never been able to tell her how proud I am of her and how much I love her". "How wonderful it would be," Billy said, "if I could go down to earth just to say those few words to her". In the play, obviously a fairy tale, Billy was granted his wish.

Let us play that game now. Suppose you were dead, and suppose you were given Billy's chance to return to earth to do that thing you most want to do but which you have not done; what is the deed that you would do? If you had the chance to return to earth, what is that kindness which you have so far neglected, but which calls out for doing? Hold on to that thought, and put it into action as soon as you can, for although you are alive today, in that tomorrow that is soon, you will not be.

A serious illness or accident sometimes teaches a person the deeper meaning of what it means to be alive. Many a person recovering from a heart attack in which he was inches away from death has said to me, "Rabbi, I really appreciate the value of life more now. I'm not going to work so hard in my business anymore. I'm going to spend more time with my wife and children, and I'm going to do more for the Temple and the community." How wise we become on the brink of death, and how foolish we grow as our strength returns and thoughts of death recede.

Again, let me say, that I speak of death not to make you sad and morbid, but to make you feel exhilarated, to make you grateful for the life that you still have. To be sure, some of us are not as healthy as others. Some of us, like me, have a pain here and a pain there, a bad back, a trick knee, an arthritic elbow. Some of us have a disabled arm or leg. Some of us have only one kidney or one lung or one eye. Some of us have even had a bout with cancer. Yet we are all alive this day, and each of us shares the miracle of life and ought to be grateful for it. Some of us can do some things that others cannot, but each of us can do some wonderful things, if we can avoid feeling sorry for ourself. This service in which we recall our beloved dead ought to move us to celebrate God's greatest gift to us - life itself.

The Yizkor Service links the generations of the present, past, and future. What is religion, as Jews understand it, but a belief that the generations are linked together in meaning, that the individual, the family, and the Jewish people have a common destiny. When each of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob died, the Bible reads, "They were gathered to their people". The Bible means to teach that our ultimate destiny is not to be alone, and we must bear in mind that our destiny, while we are yet alive, is not to be alone.

Part of the message of Yizkor is that as precious as the individual is, he/she is not the only important thing. The deeper meaning of the individual lies in his relationships with other individuals, in the family structure, in the group structure, with all who share noble goals, and with all those with whom we labor to achieve those goals.

There are some religions which teach that individual salvation is the important thing and that somehow in death we stand alone in relation to our Creator. This is only partially true, teaches Judaism. In the end, you return to your people! And just as legend has it that there is a final personal trial in which your good deeds

are balanced against your bad deeds, so our tradition teaches that there is a second trial. In the second trial, you are asked, how did you fulfill the ideals of your people? Did you bring shame or honor to them? Did you help them when you had the chance, or did you disassociate yourself from them, and ignore their needs. The second legend suggests that only those who gathered themselves to their people while alive, will be gathered to their people in death.

There is a certain melancholy bound up in the belief that the individual lives and dies only for himself. So many lives do not seem to be a personal success, and we could conclude that the life was a waste or meaningless. But if we remember that the life of the individual is but one link in the chain of life of the family and the people, in the life of humankind, then the measure of success becomes entirely different.

Think for example of time as the four quarters of a football game. The extent of your life may be for only one quarter and in that quarter your team may seem to be losing, and you may have failed in certain assignments, but the true meaning of the game is told not just in the story of one quarter but in all the quarters that are to be played. The truth is that whatever one does in his/her particular quarter is important to the total game, if only one helps to hold down the scoring of the enemy. Your life and your effort, however feeble it may seem, is important to the generations past and future, to those who played the last quarter before yours, and to those who have to play the future quarters.

Think now of the Torah. The Torah has survived with its ethical teaching for well over 2500 years. It is a great treasure; but if one generation had not learned and taught Torah, it would have ceased to be. If one generation had forgotten its responsibility to the past and to the future, that grand treasure would have withered away.

Just a few weeks ago we read from that Torah, the story of the death of Moses, in the book known as Deuteronomy or D'varim. Moses had led his people out of slavery: he had given them the commandments: and he had enabled them to survive 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Now the people stands at the edge of the Jordan River, which was wider in those days, and about to enter the Promised Land. How crushed Moses must have been to hear God say, "But you will not lead this people across the Jordan. Your time to die has come."

If we believed that an individual life has no meaning beyond itself, we could say that what happened to Moses was the ultimate injustice, the ultimate tragedy, for surely such a noble man deserved the taste of the final victory. Yet that experience was not to be his. True other Hebrews with Joshua at their head would lead the charge into Canaan; but the Biblical text goes on to read "and Moses was gathered to his people". In his death, the text suggests, Moses became part of all the great struggles and victories before him and part of all that was to come after him. Weep not for Moses. He rests with a great people whom he helped to make even greater.

Some of you may be as old as I and remember the similar experience of Franklin Roosevelt, who was America's great leader through World War II. How we leaned on every word of his fireside broadcasts, and how shocked and fearful we were when we learned that he was dead. Franklin Roosevelt did not live to see Hitler defeated, but in a very real sense, his memory has been gathered to his people. No history of America will ever be written that does not speak of the inspiration this president gave to his people in its time of dire need. So long as America endures, Roosevelt will live, but if we of the present generation break faith with the great Americans of the past, if America loses its will to be the nation of freedom concerned with the welfare of the poor as well as the rich, then the memory of Roosevelt will lose its luster.

As it is with Moses and Roosevelt, so it is with our parents and grandparents. So it is with our great grandparents who were guillotined in Spain in 1490. and with those who were incinerated by Hitler. Noone can keep alive the memory of what was noble in their lives--but us. In a real sense then, we who live today determine whether their lives were meaningful or not.

Jewish custom, amongs the Ashkenazi or European Jews, suggests that when an infant is born, he or she should be given the name of a departed grandparent. If my grandfather's name was Chayyim and my father's name was Shimon, then my father is Shimon ben Chayyim, or Shimon the son of Chayyim. When my grandfather dies, and I am born, I become Chayyim ben Shimon, or Chayyim the son of Shimon. If an outsider who knew my grandfather heard my name, he might well ask, if Chayyim is the father of Shimon, how can he be the son of Shimon? The answer, of course, is that the generations are truly interfused, and the grandparents live again in the grandchildren. It is humorously said that the reason that the grandparents and the grandchildren have such an affinity is that they have have the same enemy, but the real truth is that the grandparents sense that the grandchildren are their resurrection. Physically speaking we hand down our genes from generation to generation, but we also hand down memories and goals and moral patterns and traditions and virtues like courage and loyalty.

In these times when so many seem to be running away from the past, the wise person will search for his roots, so that he can discover the source of his strength. As we recall our dead, we Jews proudly proclaim, "These are our roots, our respected and loved ancestors whose memory and ideals we seek to keep alive, because they give our life a greater dimension. Hopefully we will earn the right to be an honored part of our people's memory, and our children and grandchildren will want to honor us.