

HOW CAN WE LEARN TO FACE DEATH

Short days ago we laid to rest one who was very close to many of us, Harry Levine. His passing came as a great shock to us. A few days before his illness here was a man full of energy and strength. A few weeks before his heart attack, a Doctor had examined him and found him in good health save for a cold. How then are we to face the fact that life seemingly can so abruptly come to an end. Many of us took the blow personally and wondered, "If it can happen to him, why not to us?" Others began to think of the deeper meaning of life and death, and we raised serious questions which never before bothered us.

Most people fear death, but some of us fear it more than others. What is it that we fear? If we were to talk about it, we would discover that each of us fear something else. Some of us fear the nothingness of death. Some of us fear lying in the ground. Some of us fear the punishments of hell. Most of us fear death simply because we don't really know what it is, and the fear of the unknown is the greatest of all fears.

Psychologists say that the things most people fear at death are really amplified images of the things they feared as a child. A child forms a concept of death, by which he means everything that is mean and terrible in life, and when he grows older he unconsciously carries these fears around with him and gives them sophisticated trappings. We will all admit that it is silly for an adult to interpret death in terms of our childhood fears, yet this is exactly what most of us do. To us, death is the room with the closed and locked door. Behind that door are strange and unknown beings, strange noises. Yet if we remember our childhood well enough, when we opened the door and peered into the unexplored darkness, we usually found something easy enough to understand or perhaps we found nothing at all.

One thing I have discovered as a Rabbi is that few of us have developed a real understanding of death, and we owe it to ourselves to be prepared for this aspect of life which will confront us sooner or later. The best understanding I have had of death is taken from the story of the hero Gilgamesh, a story which is perhaps 5,000 years old. According to the legend, Gilgamesh was in search of the secret of eternal life. He sought and found a man named Utnapishtim who, it was said, could lead him to the secret. Before you can conquer death, said Utnapishtim, you must first learn how to conquer sleep, for sleep is the nearest thing we mortals know to death. Accordingly, Gilgamesh tried to conquer sleep by staying awake. His journey had been long, however, and Gilgamesh was weary. It was not many hours before his aching body was laid out in sleep, compensating for the long hours of toil he had spent in reaching this place. Gilgamesh slept and his energies were revived. Once again he awoke, strong and prepared for more heroic deeds. But he had proven that, as a human being, he was not capable of conquering even sleep, how then could he hope to conquer death?

We have here the greatest of wisdom. What is death but the necessary complement to our wakeful moments? He who works, becomes weary, and he who is weary must have sleep if he is to labor again. Without sleep,

without the chance to regenerate our power, we could never labor on the morrow. Sleep, the death of the day, is necessary to the birth of the morning. Here is the deepest answer to the question "What is Death". Death is the end of the day which is necessary to the birth of the morning. It is a moment when the weary gains what he needs most, rest and regeneration of powers. Without death, we cannot have life.

But, you may say, there is one small point of difference between mere sleep and death. Sleep does bring a new morning which we can see and feel, but so far as we know, death is nothingness and there is nothing after. Sleep is indeed an end in which a new beginning is born. But death is the mother to nothing.

This answer would hardly satisfy a good scientist. The scientist knows that nothing is ever lost in our universe. He knows that when water dies, as when it boils and leaves a kettle, then the water is merely transformed into heat or energy or into water again. When the hydrogen atom is split, that is to say when it is disintegrated and dies, it gives birth to heat and light which can create energy sufficient to destroy or Miami or to run a battleship. Scientists know that in the physical world there is no such thing as non-existence; there is merely change, the transmutation of forms. That which was seems not to be only because its form has been changed into something completely new. In the scientific world death and birth are one.

Now if you are not a scientist, the death of one substance seems only to be death, but if you have the great knowledge of the scientist you come to understand that death is a necessary part of the development of the substances of the world. If you are a scientist, you know that death is the point of birth. The scientist can tell you also that nothing in the human body is wasted when it is laid in the grave. That part of the human being which is matter will soon change into other forms of matter. It will die but it will not cease to be.

The only question which the scientists cannot answer is what becomes of the human personality, that which the Hebrews call the "nefesh", the being of man, what some of us call the "soul". This is a question which most physical scientists turn away but which religious scientists try to answer. Unfortunately some of those who call themselves religious scientists get to fancy with their theories. They begin to speak of places like heaven and hell for which we have no evidence of any kind. The early Hebrew, the fathers of the modern religion, never used these words. They did not believe in heaven and hell in the after-life. Students of religious history know that the theories of heaven and hell, as presently taught, began in Persia and in Greece and were developed by the Arabs. Dante took over the Arabic theory in its complete description and since then it has been made part of popular Christian thought.

What happens to the human soul if what Dante says is not completely accurate? There are no simple answers. The truest answer is that no one knows But is it not reasonable to believe that if the physical parts of man are preserved in altered forms, that perhaps the spiritual part of man is also preserved. Is it so unreasonable to believe that the creator who was great enough to produce an infant is not great enough to care for a Moses or an Einstein. If there be a recurring spring for flowers and birds, shall there not be a spring for the human soul after it has experienced it's winter. If the river finds rest and new power in the great ocean after it is weary from its windings, shall not the human soul find

new life in the great ocean of life to which it ultimately returns.

If you give the mathematician three points on a circle he can plot the entire circle for you. He does not need all the points to proceed to an obvious answer. Similarly it is not necessary for us to have a road map to the world to come. Human experience teaches us that human personality has meaning, that it develops into a treasury of ability-capable of great deeds of creation and kindness. We cannot see beyond the horizon which we call death, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the line of life must continue into the infinite in whatever shape and whatever form it may assume.

The basic Jewish attitude towards life is that it has meaning and purpose, that it is ethically oriented. To be consistent, we must believe that death, too, has meaning and purpose and that it serves ethical ends. On the other hand, it is not necessary for us to spell out in detail the events that await us when we shed the body of this earth. The butterfly dreads the loss of its warm, protecting cocoon, but then it discovers that it has wings. It is folly for us to pretend that we know what lies beyond just as it is folly to fear the lengthened shadows of childhood demons.

As Utnapishtim said to Gilgamesh, the secret of death lies in the heart of life itself. The two things are not completely different. Sleep and wakefulness are both necessary to life. One thing we know, and that is the person who labors the hardest, the person who serves that highest cause, this person sleeps best with rest for body and for mind. It is the lazy and the greedy who find it difficult to benefit from the regenerative powers of sleep.

The problem for healthy thinking is not to determine what awaits us beyond the horizon of death for such wisdom has never been given to man. Our problem is to plan ways of living so that whenever our end comes, we can say that we lived well and nobly. Our problem is to taste the joy and the power of each wakeful moment: to live together without hurting or hating: to build instead of destroy. Insofar as we do these things well, we shall live well, and insofar as we do them poorly, we shall live poorly.

If, on the other hand, we paralyze our ability to act, by contemplating what will happen to us when we are unable to act, then we will become frozen and dead while yet we live. If we try to preserve our health by doing nothing, we voluntarily build a coffin about ourselves and lie dead even while we live. If we seek to preserve ourselves by snatching all that we can from others, we will isolate ourselves from the living. The secret of life lies in the contemplation of life not death, in doing and in creation not in inactivity. The garment of life becomes largest when we invite others to share it with us.

Let these thoughts guide us in the short days ahead as indeed they guided him whom we mourn this evening. Sooner than we think we shall lie with him, and if we live properly, perhaps we can say that we acted as much as he and shared as much with others as he shared. If we can earn this eulogy, then indeed shall we deserve the sleep of the righteous, which in its time is also a great blessing.