

Living in between life and death

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A census taker comes to the Goldman house. “Does Louis Goldman live here?” he asks. An older man, with wispy hair, named Goldman, gruffly replies, “No.” The census taker double checks the address and frowns. “Well, then, what is your name?” The older gentleman tersely answers, “Louis Goldman.” “Wait a minute,” the census taker shakes head. “Didn’t you just tell me that Goldman doesn’t live here?” “Ach!” says Goldman. “You call this living?”¹

What does it mean to live? This is a great topic to ponder as we gather during the most sacred day of our year. There is a famous teaching in the Talmud that Rabbi Krusepedai said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, ‘Three books are opened on New Year, one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediates. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are inscribed definitively in the book of death; and the fate of the intermediates are suspended from New Year till the Day of Atonement; if they deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of life; if they do not deserve well, they are inscribed in the book of death.’²

Many of you have heard this teaching before. None of us are completely righteous or wicked and so we are to think of ourselves as in between. During *Aseret yemei teshuva*, the 10 days of repentance, we are in limbo, our fate is up in the air. The motifs of life and death are meant to inspire us to take our lives seriously. Now I don’t take this teaching literally but more as a metaphor on how to live. Certainly, our deeds and acts can have a direct bearing on the quality of our lives. With the right perspective, striving to do as much good as we can, we can undoubtedly live lives infused with blessing.

At Rosh Hashanah, I spoke of living in the twilight in between two different states. At this season, we see ourselves on the precipice of both life and death. There is an interesting midrash that states, “Death is both near and far and yet far and near.”³ The ending of our mortal life is, on the one hand, in the distant future but on the other hand, it can happen at any time.

Pondering the limits of our human lives can solicit serious reflection as well as humor. I don’t know how many of you are fans of the comedian, Jim Gaffigan. He is known for making lots of jokes about food such as, “hot pockets.” In his recent Amazon prime comedy show entitled, “Dark Pale,” he jokes about his death. Being a practicing Catholic, he knows his body will be viewed during his wake. He criticizes dressing up the corpse in a suit as though he is going to an interview. Gaffigan emphatically states that at his wake he wants to be dressed comfortably in his pajamas. Oh and instead of people coming up to his casket in the middle of the room, he wants to be stationed by the door, sitting upright with his hand up, startling the

people as they enter. Gaffigan takes a humorous approach to death along with others. We all deal with life and death in different ways.

No matter if we are serious or jovial about dying, we really don't want to do it. Most of us take care of ourselves in hopes of gaining more years and experiences. Sometimes, the idea of living forever can be enticing. I love the reading in our prayer book at Yitzkor that if we were offered an opportunity for enteral life, on the condition that there would be no more births, no more children, no more first loves, no more future generations, would we really choose to live forever? This is a powerful perspective that we only get to live each stage of our life once. We are a child for specific period of time. Yes, we can still act childlike but we don't get to go back and really be the youth that we were. We are the age that we are right now and it won't come again. And so, we are inspired to take initiative, try to new things, and take risks because it can truly be now or never. When we really slow down and ponder all that we have experienced over the years, we realize that much can happen between our birth and our demise.

Paradoxically, we need to be aware of death in order to live fully but if we dwell too much on it, it will hinder our ability to enjoy the time that we have. As Ecclesiastes teaches,

לְכֹל זְמַן וְזֶמַן וְעֵת לְכָל-חַפְזֵי תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

“A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.”⁴ There is a time to contemplate our death and a time to focus on life. Here on Yom Kippur, it is fitting to focus on our mortality in hopes of improving the quality of the time we have left.

Life and death can be seen as polar opposites, black and white, and end and a beginning. For most of us, this demarcation is absolute. Our hearts beats, there's brain activity, and then it stops. We are pronounced dead and the time is noted. And then there are a number of instances where the line between living and death is fuzzy. Sometimes, we lose our loved ones before they are truly gone. Sadly, some of you have relatives who have dementia or Alzheimer's. These bright, one time vibrant people may not remember important events or even what happened hours ago. Maybe they recognize us or they don't. They aren't the same people we knew and they wouldn't even recognize themselves. This can be so hard to witness. We are in agony as we watch people we respected and loved so dearly diminish before our very eyes and they are no longer our mother, father, or spouse. In such times, we lose them before they are even gone.

Mental degradation isn't the only way we can lose people before they die. We can lose our loved ones to psychological afflictions. When someone we care about is plagued with a personality disorder or severe mental illness, we lose them while they still live and breathe. I can personally relate to this scenario. Many of you know that my mother hasn't taken a call, email, or visit from me in well over decade. According to a few psychologists close to my family, I learned that she has Borderline Personality Disorder. This is a difficult illness. Anything at the

wrong moment can set off an emotional explosion hence why one of the books on this disorder is entitled, “Walking on Eggshells.” When my mother is hurt or insulted over even the most minor of things, she terminates relationships. Her defense mechanism goes on steroids, as my father calls it a ‘bunker mentality.’ Decades ago, she ended all of her relationships from her side of the family and then in the past ten years, she terminated her lifelong friendships and with me as well. I still make efforts from time to time to reach out to her. I will send an email and an old fashioned letter to her with updates on myself and my kids. She never responds or acknowledges it.

For me, it feels like she has already passed away. I lost my mother years ago. It’s an odd feeling to know that she is still physically alive but unreachable by me. And so, I try to focus on the good I’ve received from her and there is a lot. When this situation was new, my son Shane, around ten year of age, commented to me how terrible it would be if I stopped talking to Gabriel, my daughter. I told him that first of all, I don’t have a disorder and that I will always, always be there and part of their lives even when he may not wish it. Nothing is going to stop that. He smiled and said that yes it was quite embarrassing when I jogged over to him and his teammates during his soccer practice. “Yes,” I exclaimed. “Even when you don’t want me around, I’m going to be there.”

What has helped me is knowing that I cannot control my mother’s decisions, but I can decide what kind of mother I am today and tomorrow. I gave a sermon years ago about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s teaching that of all the commandments, honoring one’s parent is the hardest of them all.⁵ He suggests that honoring our parents is harder than keeping the Sabbath, abstaining from adultery, and not coveting anything belonging to our neighbor. I finally understood that teaching.

Sadly, there’s another way we can lose our loved ones before they are gone and that is when they are plagued with a long term illness. They aren’t able to be the same vigorous, adventurous, productive people we knew. We know what they could do once upon a time and we are distressed to see that they are no longer able to work or do the activities that gave their lives meaning. Things change.

As I’ve been mentioning what happens to others, I would be remiss in not acknowledging how hard it is when it happens to us. God willing, if we are able to be granted many years, we are going to struggle with our own physical and mental decline. We know that we aren’t the same as we used to be when we were younger. And we feel closer to the final curtain than we ever have before. In such times, we are living in a twilight between life and death and with it comes many challenges.

I feel like I could use a drink just about now. Hmm...well, that wouldn’t be appropriate, right? Well, I’m going to take a deep breath instead....

There are some things that can help us when we or our loved ones are in the twilight between life and death. In the Torah, we have a portion that many youth hope they don't have for their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is called Tazria/Metzora. In these chapters out of Leviticus, we have a detailed account of the length of time one is impure from childbirth and bodily emissions. I'll spare you the details of these emissions but all of these cases deal with circumstances that hover between the beginning and end of our existence. The Torah portion Metzora deals with the diagnosis of leprosy and how the priest diagnoses it and the time when a person must isolate when they are unsure of whether it is indeed this deadly skin ailment or not. Interestingly, after the period of isolation is over, a person goes through a ritual to re-enter the community. There is a sacrificial offering, shaving of hair, sprinkling of blood and then the person is back at home.⁶

I imagine that having this kind of structure and custom to deal with the boundary between life and death must have been very comforting to our ancient Israelites. While we no longer practice the rites of the leper, we do have lots of other rituals within Judaism that can help us celebrate new life, mark milestones throughout the stages of our lives, and help us cope with our health and our loved ones. We have prayers. We have Shabbat. We have holidays. And we have our community and most of all, we have God. We all have very different conceptions on the All Mighty One and this is why I'll be offering a series on God throughout the year. A belief in something greater than ourselves can be a source of comfort for those with this kind of faith.

And then we come to an arena of choices we can make for ourselves. First of all, we can decide what kind of person we want to be. The twelfth century sage, Maimonides, emphasizes that we have free will. He states in the Mishneh Torah, "Do not imagine that character is determined at birth. We have been given free will. Any person can become as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam. We ourselves decide whether to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly. No one forces us, no one decides for us, no one drags us along one path or the other; we ourselves, by our own volition, choose our own way."⁷

The idea that we make decisions throughout our lives is very true. Yes, there are things beyond our capacity to control such as our birth, who are parents are, our childhood, what country we are born in, and a genetic predisposition for ailments. However, first of all, according to Maimonides, we can choose our character and strive to be the best people we are capable of being. We decide the type of person that we are no matter the circumstances of our lives.

Sometimes it's tempting to fall into despair because hard times are upon us. This is why I try to put my own concerns into a larger perspective and it's hard to find an event worse than

the Holocaust. Our people were rounded up, shot, put on trains, lead into the gas chambers, and worked to death. And yet, Viktor Frankel in his seminal book, "Man's search for Meaning," asserts that even when the Nazis had taken away their freedom, dignity, health, that they could still choose their attitude. He quotes from Frederich Neitzche, that "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." Now Frankel experienced four concentration camps and endured immense suffering. This is why his life experience and perspective is so powerful. He states that while one can find great fulfillment in beauty, art, nature, and living a life of creativity. However, "If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death..."⁸ He continues, "Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him- mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."⁹

Frankel claims that one can maintain self-worth even in a concentration camp. He made a choice during those hard years to keep his focus on his attitude and not forget why he wanted to live and for what and for whom. He advocates from his own personal experience that, "We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation-just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer- we are challenged to change ourselves."¹⁰

Frankel advocates that in situations where there are limited options, we orient our perspective to live as fully as possible and to see that life as a gift even under duress. I am not saying that it is easy. He is trying to give us a way not to give up. There are still meaningful encounters to be had with family and friends. There is still a reason to live as best we can under any circumstance. We need to focus on what we live for and this can help give us strength to carry on and perhaps to transcend the challenges before us. Perhaps, leaning on the pillars from our Torah, practicing the rites of tradition, and drawing support from family, friends, community, and God, we may find a strength that we did not know was there before.

And so, as we enter the twilight of our lives where death and life comingle, may we be able to find ways to see the value of our time. God gives it to us for a reason. And so, if a census taker or anyone else asks us if we live, may we be able to say that yes, we do. We are striving to live our days fully and love whole heartedly. And we pray that this year is one of vitality and meaning for ourselves and our loved ones.

Notes

1 Joke Life and Death <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-jokes/>

2 RH 16b

3 Ecclesiastes rabba 8:18

4 Ecclesiastes 3

5 Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaching- honoring one's parent is the hardest of them all.⁴

6 Lev 13 & 14

7 Hilchot Teshuva

8 Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor E. Frankel Pg. 67

9 “ “ pg. 66

10 Pg. 112