

There is a Chasidic folktale that I heard that goes like this. There was a man in Eastern Europe who was caught spreading lies about another person. The rabbi confronted him and to his credit, the man admitted the truth except he had thought the statements were true. When he found out that he had been spreading lies, he felt awful and begged the rabbi to help him find a way to make things right. The rabbi asked him if he had a pillow filled with feathers. The man looked confused but said yes he did. The rabbi asked him to bring the pillow to him outside the synagogue right before the *minyan* that day. The man did as asked and when he got there, the rabbi asked him to cut the pillow open and shake all the feathers out. The man thought the rabbi was going senile but did as he was told. As the feathers blew in the wind, the rabbi turned to the man and said, "Now go and collect every one of those feathers." The man looked at him and said, "Rabbi, you know that is impossible." And the rabbi turned to him and said, "So it is impossible to take back the lie that has spread all around this town just like these feathers have." Well, today I have a confession to make. For way too long, I have misunderstood a statement that many people have made. And now I have to continue the difficult task of finding as many of those feathers as I can. I never understood it when people said my youngest is .... Fill in the blank. My baby is learning how to walk. My baby is going to kindergarten. My baby is learning to ride a bike, drive a car, graduate from school, get married, or have a bar mitzvah. My attitude for way too long was what did you expect? Did you really want your 17 year old to be sitting at home all day or riding around town with a plastic tricycle? It just did not make sense to me until our baby started to grow up.

Wasn't it yesterday that my children were walking with a diaper waddle, learning to ride a bike or holding onto our hands for dear life? In my defense, for once in my life I was focused on the proper grammar of the sentence. Our **baby** means that the focus is on the noun, our youngest son. It was not until Rodney had a bar mitzvah that I really understood the focus of the statement was really on the pronoun **our** or its singular form **my**.

When did I get old enough to have three children who had a bar mitzvah? When did I pass through the stages of life that included introducing the world to my sons? How do I have two young adult children and one more that is on his way to joining them? When did being an empty nester become a reality and not a fantasy that was way too far off for consideration? How did our baby grow up so fast? How is it that time flies by these days so quickly when it was just yesterday that it crawled at a snail's pace? Now I know that none of these questions or

really this observation is all that original. In fact, people have been discussing these questions for millennia. Forgive me for being a little late to the discussion.

It is very clear that Judaism teaches us to honor our elders; that age brings experience and wisdom something to be cherished and valued. All of which makes sense. I am, of course, commanded to honor my elders. But what happens when I find myself increasingly the elder others are trying to honor? What then am I supposed to do?

One of my favorite quotes from Reb Nachman of Breslov is when he forbids people to be old. On the *pashat* level, the surface level, that sounds good to me. I am not aging; I am not aging; I am not aging; my new mantra. Maybe if I say it enough-it might be true.

On a deeper level what is Reb Nachman of Breslov trying to teach us? He wrote, "It's not enough to believe in G-d and His Tsaddikim, you also must believe in yourself. It is forbidden to be old – neither an old saint or an old devotee, being old is not good. One should always start living and do good deeds as if it is his/her first time. Elders of Holiness constantly lengthen their days expanding their consciousness with fear of Heaven... Giving charity helps to open these gates of renewal and Divine Desire (The converse also holds true; leaders and rabbis who do not actively renew their devotions to G-d with new excitement, knowledge, intensity, and desire, cause the Holy Faith to be shrouded in the darkness, gloom, and depression...)"

I remember when I interviewed for this job at CJC a congregant on the search committee asked me (at the time I was 17 years younger and had only brown hair) how would I relate to those congregants who were older than I? I remember stating something to the effect that any rabbi you hire will at any one year be only one given age. Someone older will have a harder time understanding how to do outreach to millennials. After all, none of us is Gd. No one is capable of being everything to everyone no matter how hard they try. I then, of course, went on to explain my experiences working with empty nesters and retired congregants, doing hospice work, and visiting people in the hospital. And to be honest, for 14 years or so, I never gave the question or my answer much thought. And then about three to four years ago, individual congregants, all over the age of 65 or 70, started talking to me about feelings of loss, abandonment, death, life after life, Jewish ritual, physical decline...and I realized how important and real these congregants' question were; how much I had minimized it with a naive answer; how much you cannot know because, well, you just do not know. And so I began with you on this journey to explore what it means to face mortality, to confront death, not with the purpose

of being morbid or sad, but rather to give us an honest perspective on how to get the most out of life while we still can. I began this journey human beings have been embarking on since the creation of humanity, but for me it has been the first time, as it must be the first time for each of us at one point or the other.

There really is no better time to think about the relationship between life and death than on Yom Kippur. In fact, the rabbis commanded that we remove the aspects of life that we need to live for the day so that we were forced to confront the reality of our own mortality. So we fast not only from food but from liquids as well. On Yom Kippur Jews wear white for the same reason we are buried in all white. White symbolizes purity; the purity of the soul we strive for. We refrain from wearing jewelry or fancy shoes because we can't take those things with us to the next world. We don't shave, wear perfume, or have sexual relations, all the necessities of maintaining and enjoying a body we will not need in the next world. And, of course, we come to services for *yizkor* to remember those we knew and miss because they died before us and often their mortality reminds us of our own. You see, Yom Kippur is our opportunity to jumpstart the discussion. What does my life mean to me today? What is still on my bucket list? What do I still need to do to have a fulfilling life? What gives my life meaning and purpose right now? Who am I? And who would I like to become while I still can?

We read the book Being Mortal and From Age-Ing to Sage-Ing. As we met and discussed living well with loss, I heard for the first time what you had been sharing all along! It physically hurts to age; each ache and pain reminds me of a time when there was no physical pain at all. There are way too many funerals to go to. I spend way too many hours at doctor's appointments. I am so worried about my mother/father. How can I help them and my kids at the same time? My bucket list? Who has time to think about it? When I do have time for myself, I am too tired to do anything with it. How much time and money am I going to spend to eliminate the gray hair, wrinkles or receding hair line so that I won't become invisible or useless in our youthful society? How do I get the most out of the life I have while I still can?

For the truth of the matter is that Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi and Ronald Miller were right when they wrote, "Death is not a cosmic mistake. Woven into the warp and woof of existence, the presence of death deepens our appreciation of life. It also regenerates our psyches in preparation for harvesting. The more we embrace our mortality not as an aberration of Gd and nature, but as an agent urging us on to life completion, the more our anxiety

transforms into feelings of awe, thanksgiving and appreciation.” Awe, thanksgiving, and appreciation---for another year.

I want to thank those people who approached me throughout the years for you have propelled me to read, talk, teach, and learn- mature in ways I did not know I could. Since then we have had congregational book groups, individual classes, and this coming year a whole program of intergenerational programming. In addition, we are part of an important pilot program being sponsored by the Horizon Foundation. This pilot program encourages people to talk about their end-of-life care wishes while they still can. Ninety percent of Americans say that talking about their end-of-life care wishes is important; however, only 30 percent of Americans are actually having these conversations. Ellen Goodman, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and co-founder of The Conversation Project which is partnering with the Horizon Foundation, wrote, “People fear that speaking to their loved ones about their final days would be too grim, but in **reality**, these are among the most intimate and meaningful conversations people can have.”

There is a wonderful commercial which begins “Your heart attack will arrive in two days.” What if I knew that tomorrow I was going to be hit by a drunk driver, have a heart attack, stroke, cancer diagnosis or drown in a flood? Often thinking about our own deaths is scary and sad. They bring up memories of others we have lost. They remind us of the pain we have learned to live with. What if we allowed ourselves to feel that pain instead of running away from it? For that pain is also a part of life. Many of you have described how hard it is to live with loss, limited mobility, digestive complications, memory loss, grey hair, slower movements, word recall problems and/or a lack of professional identity. These are things we joke about, make fun of people for, but rarely admit to being frightened of the new reality. What if we treated aging as a gift instead of a challenge? After all, as my mother often reminds me, what is the alternative?

You see, the one thing we know is that every single person in this room will die or as Rabbi Jack Reimer wrote, “The day will come when my body will lie upon a white sheet, neatly tucked under four corners of a mattress in a hospital that is busily occupied with the living and the dying. At a certain moment, a doctor will determine that my brain has ceased to function, and that, for all intents and purposes, my life has stopped. When that happens, please do me a favor. And do not call this my death bed. Call it instead the bed of life.....”

Call it my bed of life. For this death heightens all my senses, allowing me to truly appreciate my life. What am I asking of you? I am asking you to go home and call/write those people you love and tell them. I am imploring you to confront those life-sucking circumstances and try to make them healthier. And if there are people in your life with whom there are no amends that can be made, contain them in a small psychological space and find meaning in the rest of your life. I am asking you to talk about death as you talk about waking up in the morning; that you attend one of the upcoming programs on talking to our young children, our adult children, and our parents about death and dying; that you have what we call in our family “the death talk,” the one where you express your wishes in dying as well as after death. Read a book about Jewish rituals surrounding death and dying. Share with me your wishes so that I can share them with your family members when the time comes.

I’m asking that you recognize the bed of life you wake up from every day with as a new day, a new opportunity, Yes, that day will have physical and emotional pain as part of it. Yes, that day will be challenging, and events during it will annoy and distract us. But at the end of that 24 hours, how will I be defined or remembered?

Joshua Loth Leeman wrote,

We are like children privileged to spend a day in a great park, a park filled with many gardens and playgrounds and azure-tinted lakes, with white boats sailing upon tranquil waves. True, the day allotted, to each one of us is not the same in length, in light, in beauty, some children of earth are privileged to spend a long and sunlit day in the garden of the earth. For others the day is shorter, cloudier, and dusk descends more quickly as in a writer’s tale. But whether our life is a long summery day or a shorter wintry afternoon, we know that inevitably there are storms and squalls which overcast even the bluest heaven and there are sunlit rays which pierce the darkest autumn sky. The day that we are privileged to spend in the great park of life is not the same for all human beings, but there is enough beauty and joy and gaiety in the hours if we will but treasure them. Then for each one of us the moment comes when the great nurse, death, takes each of us children by the hand and quietly says: ‘It is time to go home, night is coming.... The day is gone. Stars shine in the canopy of eternity.’

Rev Nachman of Breslov wrote that I was forbidden to get older. He did not forbid me to die. Even that was beyond his imagination. I imagine that Reb Nachman would have agreed with the statement that our baby was growing up. He would have understood that this developmental change was not just for Rodney but also for me. My life was never going to be the same again.

But he also would have encouraged me to find the next new thing, the new challenge, the new sacred adventure; the new way of existing that would give my life meaning and allow me to continue to work to be a sacred part of the whole. He would have forced me to focus on the noun; our **baby** who is no longer a baby but rather a young man and the **me** who is yet to become. For in that moment we all have the privilege of celebrating the gift of our life together.

So it is true. I have a lot of feathers to pick up and it is also true that our baby had a bar mitzvah last spring. We hope to celebrate many more *simchot* for as many years as we are blessed to be alive to do so. For life and the movement of time are blessings and gifts we hope never to take for granted.

In a moment we turn to the *yizkor* part of the service on pp. 1005. This is the time we set aside to remember the people we miss, the people who helped form or influence who we are. This is the time that we acknowledge that death will come for us and we think about how we want to be remembered. May we use this time well so that as Rabbi Jack Riemer wrote,

May you have a long life, a good life, a sweet life, you and me and all those whom we love. May we have many different kinds of immortality when we complete our days upon this earth. May we have immortality in Gd's book. May we have immortality in the hearts of people who remember us, who will come to say *yizkor* for us, just as we do today for those whom we love ...May you and I have immortality someday, when the time comes, in the books that we write, in the melodies and stories and values that we teach, that are retold in our names. May you and I have immortality someday, when the time comes, within the continued life of the Jewish people and within the ongoing saga of our families. May you and I have immortality someday in the form of children who will be named for us, and who will be part of us, live on after we are gone, and may they bring hope and healing and life to others.

And let us all say "Amen."