

Tomorrow morning, we shall begin our Yom Kippur prayers with these words: "This is the day of God. On this day we are called to the sanctuary by a summons as exulting and enduring as the everlasting hills: prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"

If ever there were uttered words of dire warning, these are they: "Prepare to meet your God!" Our Yom Kippur prayer book took those words from the prophesy of Amos, a simple shepherd from the village of Tekoa who, in the Eight Century B.C.E., angered by the depravity and immorality that he saw practiced by his people, stood up in the sanctuary of Bethel one day and cried out: "Prepare to meet your God!"

Down through the 28 centuries that have elapsed since the days of Amos, those words have been uttered with fear and trembling wherever Jews gathered to observe Yom Kippur. And the words were underscored by a custom that was practiced by pious communities of Jews. They would all come to the synagogue on Yom Kippur dressed in white linens to represent the shrouds in which they one day would be buried. They took Yom Kippur seriously, as I know that many of us do, and they symbolized the seriousness of their intent – to appear before God for judgment, by dressing in white shrouds.

If there is any real purpose to this "great white fast" of Yom Kippur with its repeated refrain: "Inscribe us in the Book of Life," with its frightened question "Who shall live and who shall die?" with its heart-rending Yizkor memorial service, with its afternoon reading of the Book of Jonah in which the prophet cries out in agony: "I would rather die than live," with its Torah reading in which

God challenges us: “I have set before you life and death...” – if there is any real purpose to all of this, it is to put us in touch with our mortality...to put us in touch with our mortality.

Our fasting, our tears, our remorse, our soul-searching, the words of the prayer book and its haunting music – all are aimed at moving us to a different level of consciousness, a level where we meet a trembling father, Abraham, and cry out with him: “I have dared to plead with God, I who am but dust and ashes.”

I know that the word celebration, as natural as it might sound in association with birth and marriage, is to most people an inappropriate word when used in association with death. But I remind you of the basic meaning of the word “celebrate.” To celebrate means to perform a religious ceremony with appropriate rites. We celebrate birth and marriage by performing certain rites that remind us that God is an inspiring partner in our joy. And we celebrate death no-less by performing certain rites that remind us that God is an inspiring partner in our grief.

It is precisely with this concept of celebration that I want to begin this consideration of death in our Jewish tradition. And I want to begin by going back to a conversation that I had a few months ago with a brilliant man, a Jew, a good friend. Somehow, we got onto the subject of death, and the good man suddenly asked me: “Why is Judaism so obsessed with death?” Why is Judaism so obsessed with death?

I must admit that I was startled. Quite frankly, I did not know what he was talking about, and I stammered: “What do you mean? Why do you say that Judaism is obsessed with death?” And he said: “You know what I mean: Kaddish, Yahrzeit, memorial candles, Yizkor memorial prayers, this constant

harping on the death of the six million, martyrdom, destruction, tragedy – and especially Yom Kippur with its crying and breast-beating and memorial service. That's Judaism; Judaism revolves around death!"

As this wise and distinguished man, who rarely if ever stepped into the synagogue, said those words, I could not help but recall a passage from Ernest Jones' monumental "The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud". After pointing out that Freud was a remarkably courageous man when it came to facing misfortune and danger, Jones wrote: "...As far back as we know anything of Freud's life, he seems prepossessed by thoughts of death, more so than any other great man that I can think of...even in the early years of our acquaintance, he had the disconcerting habit of parting with these words: "Goodbye; you may never see me again." There were repeated attacks of what he called the dread of death...he once said that he thought of death everyday of his life..."

I thought of that passage and of that strange obsession with death that haunted as rational a person as Sigmund Freud, and I began to recognize the subconscious source of my friend's question. He saw Judaism as obsessed with death in the same way as he saw Freud as obsessed with death, and this bothered him. As he saw it, two of his authorities, two of the major sources of his intellectual nourishment – Judaism and Freud – were obsessed with death, and he wanted to know why.

I do not presume to be a Freudian scholar. But I must most definitely object to my learned friend's observations about Judaism, though I understand them. Judaism celebrates death, just as Judaism celebrates birth, marriage, Sabbath, Passover, B'nai Mitzvah, the High Holy Days, building a Sukkah, putting up a Mezuzah, lighting Chanukah candles and so on, through hundreds

of Mitzvot and customs of the life cycle and the festival cycle. But the vast part of the American Jewish community never experiences those hundreds of Mitzvot and customs.

When does the ordinary non-observant or semi-observant Jew practice what he thinks is Judaism? When a loved one dies. How frightened and vulnerable we become in the face of death. We accept life as a gift; somehow, it's coming to us. But death was face with fear. And because of our fear, we become subject to all kinds of pieties and all kinds of superstitions that are symptoms of our dread of death.

Jews who never light Shabbat candles will light the "Shiva candle" given to them by the funeral director. Jews who rarely, if ever, pray will ask for a "minyan" at their homes after a death. Hundreds of thousands of Jews who break the fourth Commandment, the Sabbath Commandment, every week – one might say that they break it religiously – will go to synagogue for a "Yahrzeit" and for "Yizkor" memorial prayers. Jews who demonstrate no interest at all in living Judaism – in Jewish education, in congregational affairs, in Tzedakah, in joyous festivals, in the miracle of Israel reborn – will readily admit to having been traumatized by the Holocaust. They join Jewish defense organizations and see anti-Semites lurking everywhere. They tell you how proud they are to be Jews, but their Judaism is a religion of death.

You see, it is not Judaism that is obsessed with death; if anything, Judaism is obsessed with life. Ours is the sacred tradition that cries out to us, in the words of our Torah portion for tomorrow morning:

choose life! But the less that a Jew celebrates his Judaism, the less that he knows about authentic Judaism, the more he becomes subject to that dread obsession with death.

At this point you might be ready to object. You might want to remind me that I began this sermon with those dire words of warning: "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" And I told you how pious communities of Jews would dress in white shrouds and cry out: "Who shall live and who shall die." As I explained: the whole purpose of Yom Kippur is to put us in touch with our mortality. If that is what we are here for today, so that each and every one of us may be reminded of the inevitability of death, then why is it that I object so strenuously to the notion that Judaism is obsessed by death?

Possibly I can best explain this seeming inconsistency by reminding you of what might seem to be an ethically inconsistent lesson taught by one of the rabbis of Second-Century Palestine, Rabbi Eleazar ben Hyrcanus. Rabbi Eleazar taught: "Repent one day before your death." Now that's what I call practical advice. Rabbi Eleazar, who was considered by his contemporaries to be the greatest and wisest of them all, taught us that we should repent one day before our death! And, in fact, this statement of his is recorded in Chapter two of "Ethics of our Fathers."

His meaning, dear friends, should be obvious. Clearly, he was not prescribing a life of Hedonistic unconcern for the welfare of others. Clearly, he was not suggesting that we can live a life of sin and then try to make amends when we realize that our time might be up. But just in case we might get the wrong idea about what Rabbi Eleazar meant, let me quote from a later Rabbinic text that explains how Rabbi Eleazar's students shocked at the idea that one

might defer repentance to the day before death, asked the master: "But how does one know the day of one's death?" To which Rabbi Eleazar answered: "Exactly, therefore, repent today."

Now some of you are probably as uncomfortable with words like "repent" and "sin" and "punishment" as I am. Somehow, they have a non-Jewish ring to them, like salvation, resurrection, damnation, hell-fire and all those frightened and frightening words that Bible-thumping preachers love to throw around to stimulate guilt – and to stimulate the collection. What did Rabbi Eleazar mean – and what do I who quote him mean – by "repent."

Dear friends, will it surprise you to know that I don't think of any of you as "damned sinners?" I don't know of any murderers in our congregation. I don't know of any rapists or robbers or slavers or drug pushers out there, nor am I going to implore you to "fall on your knees, brothers and sisters, and confess! That's not what we mean in Judaism by repent. I am not preaching, nor was Rabbi Eleazar preaching to the one or two percent of our community who are deviants and who would not be listening to us anyway. I am preaching...to you and to me.

I know that I could have done better in the year now gone. I could have loved more. I could have empathized more. I could have given more. I could have been more considerate, more patient, and more open to new ideas. I could have devoted more of myself to others. I could...I could have...I could have, but I didn't! And all through the year, not just on Yom Kippur, I hear that wise old man, Rabbi Eleazar saying, "Repent one day before your death."

Ah! You say, caught you again! There you go again with that obsession about death. But no, dear friends, you misunderstand, I have no fear of death. I

celebrate death! Death, as we read in our prayerbook, “is a haven for the weary, a relief for the sorely afflicted.” But I do have a fear of dying before I have repented, before I have so improved my life that the world will be a better place for my having been here.

Yom Kippur, dear friends, puts us in touch with our mortality, not in order to frighten us, not to exploit our dread of death, but in order to remind us that life is short and the tasks that we have yet to accomplish are great. Judaism teaches us that it is our obligation to devote ourselves joyously to the task of Tikkun Olam, of working in partnership with God for a better world.

Kiddushin – sacred Jewish marriage – is founded on the idea that a man and a woman who see each other as holy will then go on to build together an environment which will nurture and radiate holiness.

And then...one of them dies! Good people, lovely couple, fine Jews, partners with God, involved with life, enjoying life, celebrating life – and one of them dies. Why? Why? The anguish, dear friends, is often so great... Why? ... Why?...

And is the anguish any less when the person who was loved dies after a long life, in the fullness of year? The initial shock might be less, but the loneliness and inner grief are often even greater.

Let me share a secret with you. What is it that recharges my spiritual batteries? With all of the sickness and alienation and death that I or any rabbi has to deal with, what is it that restores my faith? What is it that makes me so certain that life is worthwhile? Well, there are many things. But the one that comes most readily to mind is the tears of a spouse and the tears of children and grand-children on the death of a person who has lived a full life – eighty,

ninety or even a hundred years. They are not crying because of fear; their grief is not the product of frustration and anger. They are crying because they loved and were loved in return, and the focus of that love is now gone.

I have no answers, dear friends, to the seeming absurdity of death. Rocks and dust beneath our feet endure, and human beings, the product of millions of years of evolution suddenly die. One is tempted to laugh with contempt and reject any notion of God and purpose. But contemptuous laughter is not the answer. When we blame or reject God, what we are really doing is sloughing off our human share of the responsibility for untimely death.

Accidents, warfare, environmental pollution, homicide, genocide – these are not acting of God. They are acts of human beings. Could God stop these things from happening? The question is a meaningless one, except for those philosophers who delight in meaningless questions. The only way that God could prevent us from polluting our atmosphere with chemicals and our civilization with hyper-tension, the only way God could prevent us from maiming and torturing and killing would be to suspend our freedom of choice.

Isn't that what Yom Kippur being all about? Freedom of choice? Remember our Torah reading for tomorrow: "I have set before you this day, life and good or death and evil..." Animals act on instinct; human being, created in the image of God, make choices.

But didn't I say at the outset of my remarks that the purpose of Yom Kippur is to put us in touch with our mortality? And now I seem to be shifting around, shifting ground by saying that the basic message of Yom Kippur is freedom of choice. What is it – mortality or freedom of choice? It cannot be both. Or can it?



Dear friends, our awareness of mortality and freedom of choice are the two sides of the same coin. It is our awareness of mortality that inspires us to make the right choices. That is the message inscribed on every page of your Yom Kippur prayer book. Knowing that we must die, we'll seek to achieve immortality: we think, we plan, we love, we create, we teach, we give, we share, we help – all so that something of us may live beyond our brief span of years.

And what of those who do not love, who do not create, who do not teach and share and help – those who do not celebrate life and who never demonstrated that they are created in the image of God? Our rabbis taught: "The righteous are called living even in death; the wicked are called dead, even in life."

Dear friends, those of you who are living, truly living, inspired of the awareness of your mortality – you will never die. And those of you who merely exist, who have never experienced the exquisite pain of celebrating death – what of you? Listen – listen well to our Torah reading for Yom Kippur: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse; therefore, choose life that you and your descendants may live..." Amen.