

Remember the Day of Death

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In the year 1967, Rav Soloveitchik, the renowned Talmudist and Jewish philosopher was grief stricken. In a single year, Rav Soloveitchik lost his wife, his mother, and his brother. One of his primary students at the time, Rav Hershel Schachter, remembers how the famous rabbi remained in a deep state of sorrow throughout the year. In particular, the Rav mourned for his wife. As Rav Schachter recalls, "He would recite the Kaddish for her countless times, and he walked around an entire month wearing the jacket to which he had done the *kriah*, in a lost and bewildered state" (*Of Language and Nuance*, Mishpacha p. 60, 20 Elul 5769).

Despite the depth of this grief, in one of his essays, Rav Soloveitchik shared a surprising account. The Rav writes:

"On the seventh day of Pesach, 5727 (1967), I awoke from a fitful sleep. A thunderstorm was raging outside, and the wind and rain blew angrily through the window of my room. Half-awake, I quickly jumped to my feet and closed the window. I then thought to myself that my wife was sleeping downstairs in the sun room next to the parlor, and I remembered that the window was left open there as well. She could catch pneumonia, which, in her weakened state, would be devastating.

I ran downstairs, rushed into her room, and slammed the window shut. I then turned around to see whether she had awoken from the storm or was still sleeping. I found the room empty, the couch where she slept neatly covered.

In reality she had passed away the previous month...

The most tragic and frightening experience was the shock that I encountered in that half-second when I turned from the window to find the room empty. I was certain that a few hours earlier I had been speaking with her, and that at about 10 o'clock she had said good night and

retired to her room. I could not understand why the room was empty. I thought to myself, “I just spoke with her. I just said good night to her. Where is she?”

You see, a person can be in a deep state of mourning; he senses the absence of his loved one in every moment and every encounter; and yet, this very person, in the blink of an eye, can suddenly forget that death has already knocked on the door, has already entered the room.

How difficult, how hard it is to face the pain of loss, of death...and yet... how easily we forget that death is already here.

Rav Soloveitchik is not unique in this regard.

As your rabbi, I have seen this happen countless times to members of our community as they observed shiva for their own loved ones. Often, at some point, as the mourner recalls stories about the deceased, the mourner accidentally slips from past tense to present tense, from what was and can no longer be, to what is and will always be. The mourner, unconsciously, shifts from an awareness of the person’s absence to a false belief in their presence, in their still-being-there.

Now, if the presence of death could be suppressed or forgotten even in the extreme context of observing shiva or *shloshim*, a time of great loss and mourning, then surely its presence easily drowns in the humdrum of daily life.

The great modern Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, aptly describes the paradoxical nature of the presence and absence of death in daily life. Amichai writes:

In a Jerusalem courtyard I saw seeds
spread on a cloth to dry in the sun, and I said:
Let me be their historian and tell them about the watermelons
and pumpkins they came from. I insist that the sand

remember the stone, that the stone remember the great rock
and the rock—the lava and the fire.

And I myself forget what took place last summer,
even what took place yesterday, which happened to be
a Wednesday. But I remember
the psalm the Levites would sing each week
in the Temple on Wednesday.

(Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*, p. 104)

For Amichai, the daily, simple details of our life constantly speak of our passing from this world. The seeds, the fruits, the grain of sand, the stone, the lava, and the fire. Signs of fragility and finitude surround us. Death is in the room but we seldom face it.

At times, this sort of forgetfulness is essential. Many of our most critical decisions are fueled by a necessary optimism and a positive type of naiveté. If it wasn't for this forgetfulness perhaps each of us would never take great risks or invest ourselves fully in important, yet ephemeral initiatives, passing relationships, and temporary dreams. All good things come to an end. And yet, despite all that, we still choose to sacrifice for the sake of love and friendship, God, family and community.

At the same time, at the very same time, remembering death can be just as essential in guiding the way we lead our lives. It is no wonder therefore that our rabbis draw a critical connection between our ability to mend our ways, to repent and make *teshuvah* and our ability to be conscious of (literally, to remember!) and reflect on our own passing from this world.

In Tractate Shabbat we read:

שבת קנא, א

רבי אליעזר אומר שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך.

R. Eliezer urges us, “Repent (at least) one day before your day of death.”

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי אליעזר: וכי אדם יודע איזהו יום ימות?

R. Eliezer's students challenged him, "Does a person ever know the day on which he or she will pass?"

אמר להן, וכל שכן! ישוב היום שמא ימות למחר ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה

Not missing a beat, R. Eliezer replied to them, "How much more so! Let that person return today, lest he passes from this world tomorrow, so that he lives all the days of his life in a state of *teshuvah*."

In codifying the Laws of Mourning, Maimonides articulates this connection even further:

רמב"ם הלכות אבל פרק יג

הלכה יב

כל מי שאינו מתאבל כמו שצוו חכמים הרי זה אכזרי, אלא יפחד וידאג ויפשפש במעשיו ויחזור בתשובה, ואחד מבני חבורה שמת תדאג כל החבורה כולה, כל שלשה ימים הראשונים, יראה את עצמו כאילו חרב מונחת לו על צוארו, ומשלשה ועד שבעה כאילו היא מונחת בקרן זווית, מכאן ואילך [כאילו] עוברת כנגדו בשוק, כל זה להכין עצמו ויחזור ויעור משנתו, והרי הוא אומר הכיתה אותם ולא חלו מכלל שצריך להקיץ ולחול.

"Whoever does not mourn over his dead in the manner which our Sages commanded is cruel.

Instead, one should be fearful, worry, examine his deeds and repent.

If one member of a group dies, the entire group should worry. For the first three days, one should see himself as if a sword is drawn over his neck. From the third day until the seventh, he should consider it as if it is in the corner. From that time onward, as if it passing before him in the market place. All of this is so that a person should prepare himself and repent and awake from his sleep. Behold it is written in Jeremiah 5:3: "You have stricken them, but they have not trembled." This implies that one should awake and tremble."

According to R. Eliezer and Maimonides, among many others, the awareness and even near encounter with death, affords a unique opportunity for the individual to reflect upon the value of his or her life, an opportunity that must not be ignored.

Tractate Brachot (42b) offers a profound story that helps unpack the meaning of this unique opportunity.

When Rav died, his disciples walked after his casket in the funeral procession. On their return from the funeral, they said, "Let us go and eat a meal by the river Danak." After they had eaten, they discussed a complex question of Jewish practice; can they recite the blessing after the meal as a cohesive unit despite the fact that they had initially sat down for the meal haphazardly, not intending to do so as a group. The rabbis were stumped. They could not find an answer. At that very moment, R. Adda b. Ahabah rose and turned the rent in his garment from front to back and made another rent, saying, "Rav is dead, and we have not even learnt the rules about grace after meals!"

In an essay that discusses this very story, Rav Soloveitchik remarks:

"Man is usually late in value judgments. His appreciation of persons, things, and events is a product of hindsight. In retrospection, man discovers the precise value of someone who was but is no longer with him. This delayed understanding and appreciation is painfully tragic. While the departed was near and we could communicate, we were only partially perceptive of his (her) identity. Our awareness of his specialness, as someone vital and precious to us, comes at the very instant he departs and withdraws into a mist of remoteness. Only then do we inquire with painful longing, "Who was he who brightened my days? What did he mean to me? Why do I feel so bereft and disoriented? ...What exertions or treasures we would now readily expend for only five minutes with them, to open our hearts and minds to them, to make amends, to say what was left unsaid, to do what had been neglected" (R. J. B. Soloveitchik, *Man of Faith in the Modern World*, p. 125-126).

These questions, the questions that pain and torment the mourner's heart and mind, are the very questions that can transform our own lives while we are still in this world. Our encounters with death, our ability to remember that our own end is inevitable, must propel us to seize every opportunity to mend and to repair. Even more so, it must propel us to love, to give, and to live more fully.

R. Eliezer's teaching – "Repent (at least) one day before your day of death" – must not weigh us down. Instead it must lift us up.

"Repent (at least) one day before your day of death!"

Imagine how different our life would be if we kissed or greeted our loved ones, our spouses, our children, or friends, as though it was for the very last time.

Indeed, how differently our Day of Rest, our Shabbat, would be or how differently our prayers would ring in our hearts, if only it was our very last Shabbat, our very last prayer.

Oh, how differently we would choose to impact the world if only we remembered that it may not be so tomorrow, that *we* may not be here tomorrow.

On Yom Kippur in particular, death weighs heavily on the bottom line. We remove our shoes as though we are in a state of mourning. We wear white recalling the white shrouds enveloping the deceased. The *Yizkor* service reminds us of the fragility of life, while the daunting words and melody of *Unetane Tokef* pound upon us: "Repent!"

"Repent (at least) one day before your day of death!" – make life count now.

As we transition to the Yizkor service, I would like to describe to you the final moments our family shared as my father completed shiva for his beloved mother, my precious grandmother, Nona Gita.

It happened on the very last day of shiva. As many of you know, on the very last day of shiva, the seventh day, mourning is only observed during the early hours of the day. As Jewish law teaches us, "*Miktzat yom ke'kulu*" – "Observing mourning customs during just a small part of the day is considered as though one observed mourning throughout the day."

My father was just about ready to rise from his mourning, to complete the cycle of seven days since his mother's burial. The phone rang. It was my mother's mother, *shetechyeh*, may she live in good health till 120. My mother's mother, who we *also* call Nona, wished to share a few words of comfort with my father as he was about to end the week of shiva. My mother handed the phone to my father and said, "It's Nona. She wishes to speak with you." My dear father, without hesitation, lifted his head and quietly asked, "Which Nona, which grandmother is it?" He then burst into tears.

For a moment, at the very end of shiva, after a week of reflecting on his mother's life and passing from this world, my father suddenly forgot that his mother, that our Nona, was gone, was no longer living.

My friends, my Beth Israel family, sometimes we forget the presence of death, but sometimes a person's life is so present, is so deeply felt, that even after they are gone, even after they are buried and shiva is completed, they remain alive in our hearts, in our homes, in our lives.

This Yom Kippur, this year, may we seize every opportunity to make *teshuvah*, to mend our ways, to connect, to love, to give, to live.

May our lives be guided by the presence of our loved ones who are no longer here.

May their passing from this world compel us to live our lives differently while we still can.