

Blessings, Blessings, Blessings

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Once, I heard this very short joke:

On a job interview, a rabbi was asked, “What is your favorite life cycle event to officiate at?” He answered: “Funeral.”

I heard this joke about seven years ago. Only now, can I say that I can understand and relate to what this rabbi meant. Do not get me wrong, I love to officiate at baby namings and at weddings as well, but there is something very different about funerals. Why am I talking about death on the eve of Yom Kippur? Yom Kippur and funerals are connected. This I will explain later.

The Book of Ecclesiastes states that: “A day of one’s death is better than a day of birth.” Our sages explain that when a person is born, we do not know what path this person will choose, what road he or she will take as they go through life. Whereas, when a person dies, we know all the answers. We know if the person died as a *tzadik*-a righteous person, and if he or she was true to themselves and to others.

In my professional life, I officiate at a lot of funerals for the Russian speaking community. For many families, it is essential that a Russian speaking person say the last words for their loved one in their mother-language, the language that they know and can relate to. So, what about officiating at a funeral is so meaningful for me besides doing a *mitzvah* and being helpful to the people during such difficult times? I learn! I learn of amazing stories, incredible lessons, and wonderful teachings that people leave behind. Before death everyone is equal. There are no conversations about money or any material possessions. Instead, the conversation is about real values, such as kindness, compassion, sympathy to others, and thoughtfulness. Life can be an amazing journey and it is partially in our hands to make it such.

“*Mi Yodea Yom Hamitah*”? “Who knows the day of one’s death?” Our sages teach us that because we do not know when this day will come, we should live every day as if it is our last day. So, if this is our last day, what would we be doing differently? I always say that I have a long life in front of me just because I still have a lot to do. What if I do not? Am I doing all that I can and am capable of doing right now?

Every time I go to meet with a family and talk about the deceased, it gives me a chance to evaluate and re-evaluate my own life. I believe that the rabbi from my earlier joke meant exactly this when he said that funerals are his favorite life cycle event at which to officiate.

There are incredible stories of how people, after facing some dangerous situation, whether a sickness or being in bad car accident, turn their lives around. These people look at life in a different way. Every minute becomes precious for them.

We all want to live our lives so that when the angel of death appears before us, we can say: “Yes, I was the best person I could be and I lived my life to the fullest.” I imagine that when this occurs, none of us will wish for another house, car, or a boat.

Maybe a little more time to be with our families and friends, perhaps. But this question has to be decided for each of us individually.

But do we have to wait for something so horrible to happen to us so that we start living our lives? When I thought about talking about death in a context of a family service, I hesitated and considered changing the topic entirely. As I thought further, I said to myself: “No, let our young generation hear the message as early in life as possible, so they start living their lives today and not tomorrow.”

This is what Yom Kippur is all about. The genius of our religion, which has proven itself over and over, gives us another chance to see its brilliance. Rav Nachman said: “All the world is a narrow bridge, between the nothingness at the beginning and the nothingness at the end. We spend our whole lives on the edge of this cliff, unaware that we are even on it.” The High Holidays are a picture of this bridge. Rosh Hashanah is all about Birth, and Yom Kippur is about Death. Rosh Hashanah is *Yom Harat HaOlam*, the day when the world was born, and Yom Kippur is the day we rehearse for our death by wearing a shroud and by staying away from life affirming activities, like eating and drinking.

On Rosh Hashanah the Torah reading begins *u'fachad Adonai et Sarah* -- and God remembered Sarah by giving her a new born son. On Yom Kippur the portion begins *acharey mot* -- after the death of the two sons of Aaron. So the High Holidays are a bridge; a compressed journey -- *k'fitzat haderech* -- the voyage from birth to death in ten days time.

Larry Hoffman, an amazing scholar and an inspiring liturgy professor at Hebrew Union College, says that “On Yom Kippur we stand face to face with our mortality. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed... who shall live and who shall die.”

We start our preparations for Yom Kippur beginning with the late night service, called “*S'lichot*.” In Hebrew “*S'lichah*” means ask for forgiveness. We ask for forgiveness from those people whom we have done wronged. On Yom Kippur G-d can forgive only our wrongdoings “*Bein Adam laMakom*,” “between human and G-d” like not keeping the *Sabbath* or the Laws of *Kashrut*. G-d can not forgive us if we did transgressions “*Bein Adam l'Adam*” “between human and another human.” So, assuming that we asked for forgiveness and received the pardon from other human beings, we enter the Day of Yom Kippur.

On this day we are suppose to wear a *kittel*, the white shroud in which the dead are traditionally buried. It is also customary, on *Erev Yom Kippur*, one night a year, to wear the *tallit*, the prayer shawl. Some scholars note that a white *tallit* and a *kittel* are very similar in what they represent.

On Yom Kippur we also say the *vidui*, confession. The long confession, *vidui rabbah*, which is “*al cheit*”, or a short one, *vidui zutta*, which we know as “*ashamnu*.” We say the *vidui*, the final confession, on two occasions in our lives -- on Yom Kippur and on the day of our death. Thus, Yom Kippur is one day a year when we are given an opportunity to look back at the life we are living up to this moment. In the next 24 hours, we have to decide if this is what we want for the year 5767 and in what ways we want to change.

Does Judaism give us the recipe? You bet! Let me share with you just one that makes the most sense to me. The message is in the story that is called “The Curse of

Blessings.” This story was written by Mitchell Chefitz who is the spiritual leader of Temple of Israel of Greater Miami. This book was suggested to me by our Temple member Sheila Deitchman.

Story “The Curse of Blessings”

Once there lived a young man, his name was Shlomo.

Shlomo was 20 years old and he just graduated from a school of law.

He became an officer of Law and was very proud of himself...he was too proud of himself.

Every chance he had, he showed off his power and his new, shiny sword.

One day he was walking his beat, when, all of a sudden, he heard a commotion.

He looked to his right and he saw an old man in rags just standing there.

Shlomo commanded: “You, come forward!”

The old man did not move.

Shlomo getting upset said again: “I am an officer of Law and I command you to come forward!”

In response, the old man in rags said: “I do not know what to do with you.”

“What you do with me? What you do with me? What am I going to do with you, that is the question! For the last time, you come close!”

The old man just repeated: “I really do not know what to do with you.”

Shlomo got really upset, blood rushed into his head. He did not know what he was doing.

He took his new and shiny sword, and he stabbed the man.”

The old man fell to the ground and he said: “I know what I will do with you. I will give you the curse of blessings. Every day of your live you will have to say a new blessing if you want to live the next day. You can not use the same blessing you said a night before or ten years before. Every day you will have to come up with a new blessing.”

In a mean time, Shlomo was really upset. He was mad but he did not want to hurt the old man. He was looking around and wanted to get some help. Help! Help!

Then he looked back to where the old man was lying but the old man was gone! The ground was empty and the grass seemed untouched.

“It was a nightmare”-Shlomo said. “It never happened. I imagined it.”

So he continued with his beat.

That night, Shlomo came home, made himself some hot tea. All of a sudden he felt his body growing cold and knew from the chill that his life was leaving him.

He said: “*Baruch Atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam...*Blessed be Our G-d for creating this... beautiful sunset.”

The chills were gone.

“Coincidence”- Shlomo thought.

The next day, the same happened. As soon as Shlomo felt the chills coming back, he said: “*Baruch Atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam...*Blessed be Our G-d for creating... me.”

Again, the chills were gone.

“The curse of Blessings was for real.”

From then on, every morning Shlomo had to say a new blessing. “Blessed be Adonai, for allowed me to wake up this morning.” The next morning he blessed his ability to rise from his bed, the following day that he could tie his shoes.

As time went on, he started to enjoy giving blessings.
He started to enjoy the world around him more and more.
In order to come up with the new blessing every day, Shlomo had to learn new things.
He learned the names of every tree and flower so that he could bless them.
As he was running out of things to bless, he learned to bless relationships and people around him.

Years passed, decades.
Shlomo, the Officer of Law, became known as a man of blessings. People wanted his blessings and came from all over the world to get them. His words had power.

Shlomo was getting old. He turned 100, then 110, and finally 119. All his friends had passed away. On his 120 year birthday, he thought to himself: “All my friends are gone and I think it is a time for me to go.”
That night, he decided not to say a blessing.

The night came; the familiar chills came back into his body. All of a sudden, an old man in rags showed up next to him.
“You! I thought about you every day for the last 100 years!-exclaimed Shlomo, “Where did you disappear that day?”
“Yes,”-the man in rags said, “I know, but you still do not know who I am... I am an angel who was sent to you to harvest your soul. When I saw you that day, I did not see anything to harvest. A nice uniform is all that I saw.
Therefore, I gave you the curse of blessings, and look, what you have become! I am very proud of you and it is time for you to come with me.”

Shlomo, feeling overwhelmed with feelings, said: “*Baruch Atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam Shehecheyanu, V’kiimanu, Vehigianu Lazman Hazeh!*...Blessed be Our G-d that you have kept me alive and sustained me so I could live to this moment!”
“Now look what you have done!” the man in rags said in frustration. “A new blessing!”
Life flowed back into the Officer of Law, and he and the man in rags looked at each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.”

In our tradition there are blessings for anything and everything we can imagine. There are blessings for seeing a rainbow, hearing thunder or seeing lightning. There are blessings upon seeing a Jewish scholar and a secular scholar. There are blessings to say when you see a beautiful or a non-beautiful person. There are blessings for every kind of food that we eat. We need these blessings in order to see and to notice the world around us, so that nothing passes us by in our daily routine. By saying these blessings, we turn ordinary things into extraordinary.

King David says: “Teach us to count all of our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” I would add: “Teach us to count all minutes and wonderful moments in our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom.”

G'mar Chatimah Tovah!

May it be a good seal for you and your families and may we each make it, a meaningful year to come!