

It was a sunny fall day in New Hampshire, the kind of New England day when the gray sky accentuates the colors of autumn's foliage. The air was crisp, and and now again I could smell a hint of smoke from unseen fireplaces. That Shabbat nearly eleven years ago led me to Manchester, New Hampshire's largest city, to officiate at services and perform a wedding. The Conservative synagogue in town was in-between rabbis at the time and, through a friend of a friend, the congregation had learned of my availability and invited me to participate. I agreed with pleasure -- there are few places more enticing to visit than New England during leaf peeping season, and few life cycle events I enjoy more than weddings.

After *shul* that morning I walked leisurely back to the synagogue's parsonage, a lovely old home in a stately neighborhood. In the absence of a full-time rabbi, the congregation had made the property available to visiting clergy. Susan was back home in our New York apartment; I was all alone in the quiet house. I looked forward to an afternoon of quiet reading and napping, a return to the synagogue later that evening for the sacred joy of marrying a lovely Jewish couple, and the following day, the return drive through a vibrant autumn landscape.

And then the phone rang. No concern of mine. This wasn't my house, "Must be a tele-marketer," I thought to myself, "Wrong number." It rang once, twice, three, four, five times. Then it stopped. Thirty seconds passed and suddenly the phone began to ring again: one, two, three, four, five rings, and stopped. This time I sat up and took notice. There was one person who knew the number of the house where I was staying. It was Susan. Since I don't answer the phone on Shabbat, we had devised a way to reach me if ever there were an emergency: she would ring the phone five times, hang up and wait thirty seconds; ring it another five, hang up and wait thirty more seconds. Were I to hear the phone ring a third time, I'd know to pick up the receiver. The phone had rung five times and stopped, it had rung another five times and stopped. With my heart pounding, I prayed it would not begin to ring again. But it did.

Susan would never disturb me on Shabbat unless it were a genuine emergency. What had happened? Had she been hurt, taken to a hospital? Was something wrong with my mother? I ran downstairs to the kitchen, snatched the phone off the hook. "Honey?" I asked breathlessly, "Are you OK.?"

She reassured me that she was. And then she paused. Very softly, and gently she said, “Your abba died this morning.” Abba. My dad. Ironically, his death was the one that I *hadn't* expected. He had suffered from Parkinson’s Disease for more than twenty-five years, and having survived health crisis after crisis, and hospitalization after hospitalization, his illness had been a constant backdrop to our family’s life since childhood. When he died quietly on a Saturday morning in November of 1997, it took me by surprise.

That night was one of the most difficult evenings of my life. Remember, I had a wedding to perform; and no one in Manchester to pinch hit on my behalf. So, I smiled for the camera, hugged the bride and groom, and joked with members of the wedding party, never letting on that my father had died only hours earlier. I believe that the only way I made it through that night was Abba’s presence with me under the *huppah* -- giving me the strength I needed at that moment. When the glass was broken, and the bride and groom had finally entered *yihud*, the brief period of marital seclusion that follows every Jewish wedding ceremony, I whispered to the synagogue president the reason why I couldn’t stay for the reception. I asked him not to tell the bride and groom or their families about the circumstances of my unexpected departure, but simply to make vague allusion to a pressing family matter that required my presence back home.

I never saw that couple again, but will vividly remember that night for as long as I live. That day, life revealed to me the razor thin line that distinguishes ordinary existence from tumultuous upheaval, the nano-second that separates joy and tragedy. In the blink of an eye, a quiet Shabbat afternoon was dramatically altered by a parent’s death; later that night, no more than four feet separated my camouflaged grief from a couple celebrating one of the happiest moments of their lives -- grief and joy living side-by-side under one wedding canopy.

The day my father died felt like Yom Kippur. No, not literally, of course. Nor even in the sense that our liturgy depicts Yom Kippur as a “*Yom HaDin*, a Day of Judgment.” To be honest, I have trouble relating to God as a Jewish Santa Claus reading a list, checking it twice, determining the naughty and the nice on the Day of Atonement.

Rather, it felt like Yom Kippur, because the day my dad died, life challenged me to consider its fragility, the nexus between grief and joy; it was an event that cut through the petty detritus of the mundane crap that encrusts our souls, the slights, hurts, and gossip of the plane on which we ordinarily live, the shallow drivel and superficial nonsense that permeates our everyday existence. Like a slap across the face, the message of Yom Kippur screams, “Wake up, you fool! What is really important to you? Look how fragile and easily it can be taken away!”

But there’s a huge gap between the message of the Day Atonement and the way in which most of us observe the holiday. To experience Yom Kippur is very different than simply to live through it, untouched and unchanged. If we’re pretty much the same people we were were last year when we arrived for services, if we haven’t changed one fundamental facet of our character for the better, then we existed through Yom Kippur rather than felt it in our souls. If tomorrow when we return to work, nothing has changed, then we will have also missed Yom Kippur -- even if we were present at all services, fasted twenty-five hours, and dutifully *klopped* our chests whenever instructed to do so; even if we sang *ashamnu* in good voice. The difference between merely feeling Yom Kippur and feeling it deeply is the difference between looking at one’s watch and wondering when services will end, and looking at one’s watch and wondering how much time we have left on earth to best use the gift of life given us by God.

And that’s a shame because Yom Kippur’s message no one has forever eventually comes true for each and every one of us. And when it does, it may well be on an ordinary day, out of the blue and with no warning. We can generally anticipate the joyous celebrations of life -- we know about births at least nine months in advance, we receive *b’nai mitzvah* dates several years ahead of time, and plan weddings more than a year before they take place. But the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the tragedies and losses of life, more often than not they catch us unawares. Like a tsunami without an early warning system, we remain blissfully unaware of the tidal wave of grief until the second of impact. Indeed, even when we know of a loved one’s impending death and have done what we can to prepare ourselves, even then the moment itself catches us off guard.

The sage Rabbi Eliezer once counseled his students, “שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך--Repent one day before your death.” His disciples protested, “How does anyone ever know the day of his

death?” He replied, “All the more reason to start now, for if you were to die tomorrow, it could be said that you spent the rest of your life turning back to God” (*Shabbat* 153a).

And this is why Judaism, in its great wisdom, places Yom Kippur on our annual calendar as a gift of infinite value. If we could somehow internalize the message today -- a day when we aren't traumatized, a day when we're sitting with friends and family, if we could do it now and not wait for tragedy to strike, our lives would be fuller, happier, more productive, and richer in meaning. To internalize the fragility and uncertainty of life NOW won't magically prevent tragedy from happening to us some day, but it can offer us comfort when the time comes that we did our best to love and live without cause for regret.

Some years ago, Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh instituted a program entitled “The Last Lecture.” Every year the faculty invites a different professor to consider the same hypothetical question: what wisdom would they want to impart to their students if they only had one last opportunity to address them? When Randy Pausch, a professor of computer science, was asked to address the academic university, he didn't have to imagine the task as a creative exercise. Just over a year ago -- four days before Yom Kippur to be exact -- Dr. Pausch strode into a crowded lecture hall, thanked the audience for coming, cracked a few jokes, and then said, “In case there's anybody who wandered in and doesn't know the back story, my dad always taught me that when there's an elephant in the room, introduce it. If you look at my CT scans” -- and here he flashed a giant slide entitled “The Elephant in the Room” on the wall behind him -- “there are approximately ten tumors in my liver, and the doctors told me I have three to six months of good health left.”

After a few seconds of silence, he continued. “All right. That is what it is. We can't change it. We just have to decide how we'll respond. We cannot change the cards we are dealt; just how we play the hand.” For the next 100 minutes, Randy Pausch spoke . . . He spoke about achieving one's childhood dreams . . . He talked about gratitude for the opportunities given him rather than regret for what he might not be able to achieve . . . He talked about how people can choose to frame their own attitudes . . . the significance of taking risks, and the gift of learning from mistakes rather than dwelling on them. Randy Pausch's last lecture wasn't about dying at all, it was about living. And in his short life -- he passed away in July just a few months shy of his 48th birthday -- he lived and

loved more deeply and meaningfully than many others granted far longer spans of years.

The reason we need Yom Kippur on our calendar is that so many of us believe the myth of our own immortality. I know we realize intellectually that life doesn't last forever, but so often there is a fundamental disconnect between cerebral cognition and visceral reality in our *kishkes*. As a rabbi I watch the many individuals who suffer from imaginary immortality syndrome. There are the alcoholics and addicts who deep down understand they have a problem, but postpone dealing with their disease, because they know it will be someone else's liver, brain or heart that fails this year, not theirs; the smokers who understand the linkage between cigarettes and lung cancer, but act like the statistics don't include them.

There are the families in which the various kin would prefer to remain mortal enemies because they know they'll be around when so-and-so comes crawling for forgiveness. There are others who watch loved ones die suddenly, but won't take the time to bother with a will, a medical directive, or the purchase of life insurance; death is something that happens to someone else, not them. There are the husbands and wives who won't tackle their crumbling relationships in one direction or another, because they magically believe their marital problems will work out and they have all the time in the world; there are the children who treat parents callously and know it, believing they'll be able to make it up later on, and the parents who defer spending time with their children as they await for a non-existent genie who will grant them more of that elusive substance we call life. We know that we could do better, we know that we hold grudges, we know, we know, we know. . . .But we'll live with these burdens because its easier . . . and because we can fix things tomorrow. Yet we would do well to pay heed to Shakespeare's MacBeth, who certainly understood the message of Yom Kippur: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time; and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to a dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more."

You see, my friends, Yom Kippur is the gift of the last lecture, an opportunity to decide for ourselves what is really important, to realize that yesterday no longer exists, that tomorrow may

never arrive, and that all we really have is here and now. And if we understand that, we'd understand how, no more than an hour after learning of his terminal diagnosis, Randy Pausch could say to his wife, "I just want you to know that it feels great to be alive, and to be here today, alive with you. So today, right now, well this is a wonderful day. And I want you to know how much I'm enjoying it." He thought about that and about his wife's smile, and knew then -- that's the way the rest of his life would need to be lived.

Judaism doesn't ask us to live anxiously with an invisible hourglass perched on our shoulders, nervously and helplessly watching as the sand flows ceaselessly, grain after grain, in a single direction. Life is NOT an inexorable march toward death. Death may be the end of the road, but it comes not to negate life's meaning, but rather to make it possible. Every single moment we live is an opportunity for a new arrival, a new beginning, a chance to repair our shattered souls, to affirm that which really matters, to re-create ourselves, to bridge the gap with loved ones, to jump out of the mire of past resentments, slights and insults, to forego the fleeting pleasure that comes with punishing those closest to us . . . including ourselves.

So often people will ask me in anguish, "Rabbi, is there life beyond the grave?" I don't know. But maybe that isn't the question we should be asking. As the philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel once put it, "The cry for a life beyond the grave is presumptuous if there is no cry for eternal life prior to our descending to the grave. The world-to-come is not only a hereafter, but also a herenow." Trapped by grudges or dead dreams in a yesterday that is gone is no better or worse than banking on tomorrows that do not exist, that may never exist. Either way, when we do so we cease to live fully in the present, and if we are not fully alive right now at this instant, then we are not fully alive, period.

We lead our lives like they are questions in search of answer, but perhaps we have it all backwards. Life itself is an answer, a response to the questions that come only after we are gone. In the Babylonian Talmud, the sage Rabbah once taught that when a person is brought before the Heavenly Court he will be asked, "Did you conduct your financial affairs with integrity? Did you set aside fixed time for the study of Torah? Did you occupy yourself with raising a family? Did you hope for Israel's redemption and work for universal peace? Did you search for wisdom? Did you

acquire understanding?” (*Shabbat* 31a). I don’t pretend to know how the Heavenly Tribunal works, but surely the value of our lives will be weighed, considered and questioned here on earth. Far too many times I have sat with families in the wake of a death and felt the palpable tension in the room: there are white elephants of hurt sitting in the room that no one dares to mention, the unresolved family feuds, the disputes between relatives forever frozen in suspended animation because no one wanted to take the first step toward clearing the air while the person was alive.

The weekend I traveled to New Hampshire for that wedding, I had thought to stop at the nursing home to see my father. It was on the way. But the drive to Manchester was long, it was Friday and there might be weekend traffic, I wanted to be sure to arrive with plenty of time before Shabbat. “I’ll see him when I get back,” I said to myself, “Between Friday and Monday it’s only three days, what difference will it make?” Yet as the old saying goes, “*Mann tracht und Gott lacht* -- humanity proposes and God disposes.” I never saw him again. Sure, we plan to make it right. Someday. But Yom Kippur challenges us to ask, “Why not today?” Why not, why not today? Because, friends, if you can find someone reason not to do it today of all days . . . I’d wager that you’ll find another excuse tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . and tomorrow.

When Randy Pausch asked his physician when he would die, the doctor sensitively phrased his answer to accentuate the positive, “You probably have three to six months of good health.” The response reminded Randy of the time he spent working at Walt Disney as an Imagineer, an elite team of artists, writers and engineers who create theme park fantasies. He remembered that at Disney World, when a visitor asks, “When does the park close?”, they’re supposed to answer, “The park is *open* until 8 pm.”

We, too, are Imagineers, entrusted with the mission of defining the theme parks of our own existence. We know that one day the rides will shut down, but Yom Kippur reminds us that life is open for business right now. The challenge is not how to achieve our dreams, but how about to lead our lives. If we lead our lives the right way, the dreams will find us. What time does the park close? Even if someone could tell us, our watches run too fast or slow to really know. What time does the park close? Someday. But the park is open today. We can enter the gates if we choose to. The park is open today. Not tomorrow. Today!