

5779 Kol Nidrei
Rabbi Yaron Kapitulnik

Modeh Ani

There was once a Jew who went out into the world to find out the answer to a question that had always bothered him.

He wanted to know how long will he live? When will he die?

I believe this is a question that haunts each and every one of us, especially tonight on this night of Kol Nidrei.

His quest lasted many years. He went from town to town and village to village, sure that somewhere, he would find an answer, but he never did.

The man was about to give up.

One day as he was walking through a remote forest, when he arrived at a little clay hut. Through the window he saw many flickering flames. He went to the door and knocked. No answer.

He knocked again. Nothing.

At last, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The hut was filled with hundreds of shelves, and on every shelf, there were dozens of oil candles, some of the holders were filled with oil and the flames burned brightly, while others had very little oil left.

Suddenly, an old man, with a long, white beard, wearing a white robe, appeared before him. "Shalom aleichem, my son" the old man said. "How can I help you?" The man replied, "Aleichem Ha'shalom. Never have I seen anything like this. Tell me, what are all these candles?"

The old man said, "each of these candles is the candle of a person's soul. As long as the candle continues to burn that person remains alive. But, when the candle burns out, that person's soul leaves this world."

The man asked, "can you show me the candle of my soul?"

The old man pointed to a candle on the bottom shelf and said, "This is the candle of your soul."

Now the man took one look at that flickering candle, and a great fear fell upon him, for the wick of that candle was very short, and there was very little oil left, and it looked as if at any moment, the wick would slide into the oil and burnout.

He began to tremble. Could his end be so near without him feeling it?

Then he noticed the candle next to his own...it was full of oil, and its wick was long and straight, and its flame burned brightly. "And whose candle is that?" the man asked.

"I can only reveal each man's candle to himself alone," the old man said, and he turned and left. The man stood there, trembling.

As he stood there, he noticed smoke rising from another shelf, and he knew that somewhere, someone was no longer among the living.

He looked back at his own candle and saw that there were only a few drops of oil left. Then he looked again at the candle next to his own, so full of oil, and a terrible thought entered his mind.

He will change his destiny, even if it came at the expense of the life of a fellow being.

He stepped back and searched for the old man, but he didn't see him anywhere. So, he picked up the candle next to his own and lifted it up above his own... At that instant the old man appeared out of nowhere and gripped his arm with a grip that felt like cold iron. The pain was immense, and the man closed his eyes until he suddenly felt no pain at all. And when he opened his eyes, he saw that the old man was gone, and the hut and the candles had all disappeared. And he found himself standing alone in the forest and he heard the trees whispering his fate.

And he wondered, had his candle burned out? Was he, too, no longer among the living?

This is a story about how fear of death can change us. This man is so afraid of his own death that he is willing to violate his deepest ideals to evade it. He is willing to hurt a fellow being, a total stranger, and maybe even a loved one, because he is so blinded by his own fear. If he quickly pours the oil from another candle into his own, he believes, he can fool the Angel of Death and live on for many more years.

We can all relate to this story, because the fear of death hides, in one way or another within each and every one of us.

And it may well be that we are all afraid of different aspects of death. Some of us might fear death will arrive too early, before we have had our chance to fully live our lives and leave an impression on this world. Some might fear the process of dying, hoping that we can avoid pain, degradation and the indignity that can come when we lose our physical and intellectual abilities.

Who among us does not fear how our loved ones, who are left behind will keep on living without us?

But above all, I think that we all share the fear of the randomness of death. Not knowing when our flame will burn out.

The randomness of death haunts us. That is exactly why Psalm 23 describes our lives as a journey “walking in the valley of the shadow of death.” Indeed, the randomness of our own mortality is a shadow we cannot avoid.

So, I want to ask you a question:

If you were handed an envelope, and in that envelope was a note with the date of your own death, **WOULD YOU OPEN IT?**

Would you want to know?

I ask you this question tonight, because tonight is our Jewish annual ritual of embracing our mortality. Every aspect of our Kol Nidrei ritual, every aspect of our Kol Nidrei liturgy has one purpose - to remind us of our mortality.

Many of our Yom Kippur traditions simulate to the notion of dying. We fast, going without food or water, as if we are in the final stages of dying. We abstain from earthly pleasures, as a reminder that someday, all these pleasures will be taken from us. The absence of all these “earthly” things allows us to focus on the fact that more than anything else we are spiritual beings.

We wear a kittel, or dress in simple white clothing, resembling the traditional white burial shroud. We take out the Torah at the beginning of

our service and leave the wooden ark open and empty, as if we are staring into our own empty wooden coffins.

We chant the words and music of “Kol Nidrei,” releasing us from our unfulfilled vows of the future, because we realize there is a possibility we will not be able to stand up to all our promises, not because we don’t want to, but because we might not be able to after we have died.

We struggle with the haunting message of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: how many shall pass away, and how many shall thrive; who will live, and who will die, who will reach the ripeness of age, and who will be taken before their time...”

This prayer reminds us that we do not fully control our fate, and it forces us to confront the reality that some of us will die in the next year. And some of us will face the difficult challenge of going on living after our loved ones have died. And again, perhaps the most terrifying reality is, that we do not know which of these two groups will be our fate.

But if you could know, if you had that envelope, would you open it?

Recently, I ask a friend this question. In a very Jewish way, she answered by asking me a question. “And if you knew the day you would die, what would you do differently?” I answered, “there are a few things that are unresolved in my life, I would want to try and resolve them before that date.” To this her answer was simple, “what is stopping you from doing that tomorrow?”

Her reply reminded me of one of the most profound teachings of Yom Kippur:

Rabbi Eliezer taught, “Repent One Day Before Your Death.” His students responded, “how can anyone know which day is one day prior to their death?” He responded, “repent today, because tomorrow you may die.” (Shabbat 153a)

I don’t need a date to know that there are things I need to do today. Today not tomorrow. And I am not talking about my bucket list. I am well aware that I might not get to complete my bucket list - maybe that is the entire essence of having one, to always have something you look forward to.

I am aware that I will not see every corner of the world that I want to see - and the truth is - that is fine, I've seen plenty. I might not read every book or see every movie on the top 100 list - that too is fine. I've read and seen plenty. I might not learn to play harmonica or swim with great white sharks, yes, those, are on my bucket list.

I am well aware that a good bucket list might never be completed, but when it comes to Teshuva, to repenting, when it comes to mending relationships, when it comes to loving, to showing compassion and doing what is right - the only thing that stops us, is us.

This is why there is a great sense of urgency on Yom Kippur. This is why there is a great urgency in the words of Kol Nidrei.

We realize that we might run out of time, that our candle will burn out, before we have fulfilled all that we promised, not just to others, but mostly to ourselves. Kol Nidrei reminds us that death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us when we live.

The promise to call our loved ones more often, the promise to let go of the anger, the promise to admit I was wrong and they deserve an apology, the promise to admit that I need help.

The promise to be more generous, both with my time and with my wealth, the promise to stop what I know is destructive behavior to me and to those close to me. The promise to slow down, to be grateful, the promise to be the best me I can be.

In confronting our mortality tonight, and the mortality of those around us, we face our deepest fears and we are reminded that change is possible.

The opportunity to change how we are living. The opportunity to set our priorities right. The opportunity to push ourselves to vigorously confront our flaws. Tonight, we ask ourselves what grudges should we surrender? What severed friendships should be restored? What suppressed apologies should be offered? How much more unconditional love can we force ourselves to summon?

We all know too well that as much as we want to change, it is very hard to do so without a strong incentive. Many times this incentive comes in the shape of a catastrophic event.

How many people do you know who started watching their weight and started exercising only if they were lucky enough to survive their first heart

attack? How many people had to hit rock bottom before they reached out and cried for help. I recently read the tragic story of a peanut farmer from Alabama named Nathan Mathis.

Mathis is a father who loved his daughter, but didn't love her news, the news that she was gay. He'd been taught that her truth was unacceptable. And he let her know as much. "I told my daughter that I would rather my child was dead than to have a gay child," he admits today to all those who want to hear his story...

His daughter, Patti Sue, committed suicide. She was only 22.

Today, Nathan Mathis is devoting his life to educating parents and families with gay children, how to be a source of strength and support to their children.

I pray that not one single person in this world has to experience a heart attack, the harsh pain of hitting rock bottom or the loss of a loved one in order to change.

Rather, than having to experience such pain, our Jewish faith and our Jewish ritual give us Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is here to give us an opportunity to change and it does so by reminding us that we are all dying, and we do not know when.

Tonight, we are all reminded that there is no time to postpone a difficult phone call to our estranged sister or son. There is no time to evade responsibility for wronging our brother or mother. There is no time to put off telling our children that we love them, to put off mending a bruised relationship with our spouse or that person who used to be our best friend.

There is no time to put off reconciliation with our own demons. There is no time to procrastinate when it comes to the things and relationships that truly matter.

You don't need an envelope with a final date in order to live this way.

You just have to wake up in the morning.

And you need to understand a little more about the way Judaism, especially Jewish mysticism views sleep.

When you come to think about it, it almost makes no sense from a spiritual point of view that we humans, spend about 30% of our lives sleeping. We

understand very well the physical mechanism of sleep and its importance, but from a spiritual aspect, all this time we are asleep is wasted time. If we are put on this earth to fulfill a purpose, we are definitely not doing anything about that purpose while we are sleeping 30% of our lives! Surely God could have created our bodies with the need to sleep much less.

The wisdom of Kabbalah gives us a profound answer: we sleep because God, so to speak, cannot bear to be away from us too long without closer contact. The need to sleep was created so that our souls can be in the presence of God. According to our mystics, it is not just our bodies that need to be reinvigorated and refreshed every night, our souls need the same. So, every time we sleep our physical body receives the rest it needs to function, and our souls receive the nurturing that comes from their reunion with God.

According to our mystics, sleep is truly an out of body experience. Talmud considers sleep as 1/60 of death. When we die, our souls leave our bodies and are reunited with God. But in life, each morning, we receive a new the gift of life. God returns our souls to us, with mercy and with trust.

With trust that we will use the gift of a new day, and live it, as if it is our last.

There is a prayer, Modeh Ani, that allows us to recognize this miracle of reawakening every morning and to express our gratitude:

”מוֹדֵה (מוֹדָה) אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִּים. שֶׁחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֶמּוֹנָתְךָ:”

“I offer thanks to you, ever-living sovereign, that you have restored my soul to me in mercy, how great is your trust.

This prayer reminds us of our daily brush with death.

And it brings me back to the question: “if you received an envelope with the date of your death, would you open it? If you knew exactly when your candle will burn out - would you live any differently?”

We all know very well, that such an envelope does not exist.

However, you will be receiving an envelope on your way out tonight.

It is sealed, as if it is hiding a specific date. Your date.

On the envelope you will find the words of Modeh Ani.

Put this envelope on your nightstand, let it be the first thing you see every morning as you wake up.

Let it be a reminder that we do not need to know an exact date of our death in order to live our lives to the fullest.

Let it be a reminder that each day we awaken, is God's way of showing us mercy and trusting us, that we will not waste this precious gift of life.

On this Yom Kippur, let us sit with our deepest fears, not pushing them away, but accepting them and learning from them. Let us allow our fears to lead us to new places, new relationships, new perspectives, and new ways of living. Let the fear be our motivation to examine our ambitions that have defined our lives. But tomorrow morning, as we wake up, and the first thing we see is this envelope, let us transfer the fear into a sense of gratitude, let us wake up with a sense of being trusted, let us begin every day reflecting on how we want to live and what we want to do with our one wild and precious life.

“I offer thanks to you, ever-living sovereign, that you have restored my soul to me in mercy, how great is your trust.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed in the book of a life. A life full of meaning and purpose.