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Facing Death

"Rabbi Eliezer taught: Cherish your friend's honor as your own. Be not easily provoked to anger. And repent one day before your death."[1] "Repent one day before your death." This teaching from Pirkei Avot from 2,000 years ago has been puzzled over for generations. Of course, none of us knows the date of our death. So a long tradition of interpretation has taken the teaching to mean simply that we should repent now. Since we might die tomorrow, the logic goes, we should repent as soon as possible, before it is too late. Yet there are a few problems with this interpretation. First, if Rabbi Eliezer really meant, "Repent now," why didn't he just say that? Alternatively, if he meant, "Repent every day," he could have said exactly that. The rabbis are known for using language very deliberately. Why would Rabbi Eliezer use this particular formulation if he really meant something else? Second, if the idea is that we don't know when we will die, why does Rabbi Eliezer say we should repent a day before our death? Why not an hour or a minute or a second? In fact, there is a long tradition of confession and repentance right before death as a cleansing practice to take us into the next world in purity of heart. Why a day? And third, by the same token, if we are supposed to repent before death, why a day and not a week or a month? Wouldn't more preparation be better? What is so important about fixing the time at one day?

Clearly, I don't think that Rabbi Eliezer just happened to state his teaching in a confusing way by mistake. Instead, he was intentionally trying to teach us something both important and difficult about the process of repentance and the frame of mind that it requires from us. I think he chose the word "day" – not hour or minute or week or month – with care because he was talking about a particular day, a day that is known as the Yoma Arichta, the "long day" in Aramaic, a day of intense significance in Jewish life: this day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the day of repentance and turning. But he wasn't just saying, "Repent on Yom Kippur." He was teaching that only on a day on which you stand "before your death" can true repentance enter your heart and true turning be accomplished. So to make sure that this day, the Day of Atonement, is truly a day of repentance, we must make sure that it is a day on which we face our own deaths, on which we look the fact of our own passing in the eye and take in its message.

Those facing death live differently. We hear this truth in stories and see it dramatized on film, and I've heard it many times in talking to people who do know, with greater certainty than most of us, the approximate date of their death. People facing death say that they treasure each day, that they are able to let go of small irritations and disappointments, and that they can concentrate on the people and issues that are really important to them. Often, they speak of a sense of gratitude for all that they have had and all that they still are able to experience, even if illness is limiting them physically,

[1] Pirkei Avot 2:15.

and even if they are in pain. We often are told that what makes life precious is the fact that it is finite. Those facing death say they are truly able to value the time that they have and to spend it doing what is closest to their hearts. Isn't this the way that we would all want to live?

So how can we do what they do? How can we live our lives as if we were facing death? How can we manage to live differently and more fully? How can we open ourselves to living with the knowledge that our time here is finite and let that knowledge ennoble our lives?

First, I think that living as if we were facing death requires us to come to terms with our past. We live in a now-focused culture, and I have often said that one of the lessons that Jewish tradition needs most to teach in this moment is the value of looking backwards, looking toward what was done and said hundreds or even thousands of years ago. So much of who we are and what we are is because of what came before us, and this is true for us as individuals as much as it is true for Jewish communities in general. Each time we look back at and honor the past of this community, we learn more about where it came from, what forces and values shaped it, and how those have become transformed as years passed, sometimes leaving a clear trace in who we are today, sometimes changing as new people and new priorities entered the picture. The same is true for us as individuals. Each time we look back at the years of our lives up to this point, we learn more about where we came from, what forces and values shaped us, and how they have become transformed through what we did and how we lived. Sometimes, we have gone in a very different direction than those who raised us; sometimes we have held tight to particular parts of them and their aspirations as we moved along our own path. But if we close our eyes to our past, we lose something crucial to our wholeness. We give ourselves an uneven, rickety foundation upon which to build the next stage of our lives. And we leave gaps in our understanding of ourselves that can deprive us of coming to a place of peace.

Of course, looking at our past can be painful. Sometimes, we see that those closest to us did not give us the support or nurturing that we needed to thrive, and some of us hold stories of abuse and neglect in our early lives. Sometimes, we are overwhelmed by our own mistakes, times when we acted with others in just the ways we would hope others would not act with us, and times when we were self-destructive, going against our own best interests for reasons that now escape us. And sometimes, we are struck by the opportunities we missed, the paths we didn't dare walk down, the words of comfort or acts of compassion that we didn't have the courage or clarity to offer. But if we are honest with ourselves, we will also see and remember other moments: the times others gave us unexpected help when we most needed it, the times we acted in ways that changed us and others for the good, and the times when we bravely pushed through our misgivings to do and say what was necessary. Coming

to terms with our past doesn't mean that everything will fit in neatly, that every conflict will be resolved, every hurt soothed, every mistake reversed. It simply means that we will do our best to look at it all honestly, to hold it all inside ourselves and say, "Yes, this is who I am, this is my past, and with all of its contradictions and confusions and highs and lows, this is where I came from and what shaped me." We are not looking for perfection but for wholeness, and only our past can provide the perspective that can make us whole.

Second, I think that living as if we were facing death requires reaching out in our present. At funerals and at shiva minyanim and at unveilings, we often recite an anonymous poem called, "We wait too long," and that title sums up the message of the poem very well. We all have things we should say to those around us, words of love or appreciation or apology or forgiveness to speak to friends or family members, colleagues or acquaintances. But we all think that we have plenty of time. We're so busy. Surely we can put it off one more day. When we find ourselves in significant moments, birthdays, anniversaries, and graduations, we could speak all that is in our hearts. But we hesitate. We wait. We are sure there will be another, better time. Surely, everyone really understands without us saying a word. So we let those moments pass without saying what needs to be said. We let people come into and out of our lives without expressing our love or appreciation, or even expressing our hurt or disappointment, our desire to make things different between us. And then, all of a sudden, we find that we have waited too long. The moment has gone. The opportunity has slipped away. Time or distance or even death has intervened. And our words lie on our hearts, unspoken.

But if we knew, if we were sure, that this was the last moment, the very last chance, wouldn't we push ourselves to speak up? If we really want to live bravely in the face of death, we need to make that push now. Those few words we speak at the right time matter deeply. I have talked to so many people who remember those certain words spoken to them by people close to them years ago, words that they hold close to their hearts, words that they depend on to give them strength, to give them courage, to give them comfort. And I have talked to so many people who wish fervently that they could go back and speak just a few words to people who are no longer here on this earth, words they always meant to say but just never got around to saying. Reaching out to those around us, saying what needs to be said, even having hard conversations when they are necessary – these things matter. We avoid them because they are uncomfortable or because they require us to open ourselves up to others when it is so easy to stay closed. But we rob them and ourselves of so much meaning in our lives, just because we wait too long.

Honoring the present also means treasuring the moments that we have, realizing their value and their preciousness while they are happening, rather than only in

retrospect. In Psalm 90 we ask God: "Teach us to number our days, so we may attain a heart of wisdom."[2] Many have pointed out that in the Bible, to number and count something is to treasure it, just as God numbers and counts each soul because each is precious in God's eyes. So in this psalm, we are asking God to teach us how to treasure our days as they pass, holding on to each moment. These moments may not seem special to the outside world, with no milestone marking them and no cameras recording them. But these are the moments that make up our lives, which are lived in moments: a small kindness from a stranger, a joyful greeting from a friend, a peaceful second on a park bench, a startlingly beautiful minute watching a sunset. When we treasure these moments, we make life itself into a treasure that we can appreciate in all of its fullness. That is part of the wisdom of living with the knowledge that this life will inevitably come to an end.

Finally, I think that living as if we were facing death requires a different orientation toward what we do and why we do it. One might think that facing the end would encourage us to focus only on short-term goals that we can accomplish quickly, but I think the opposite is true. Keeping in mind the finite nature of our lives should push us to set our sights on long-term goals of lasting value. We may not be able to accomplish those goals in our short time on this earth, but by contributing to the effort to make them come to fruition, we are binding our short lives to divine values that transcend our earthly existence. This can make both our short time here and our eventual deaths easier to bear, because we can see the effort to move the world forward stretching far into the future beyond us.

When we concern ourselves with transcendent values and with goals that will reach far into the future, our souls lie easily in our bodies. We can find value even in the short time we have because we know that we are, in an expression I remember Rabbi Gordon attributing to his father, relay runners in a very long race, using our strength to advance the baton as far as we can before handing it off to the next generation of runners. That long-term perspective is one that is given to our elders, but we can all live by it if we can keep the briefness of our lives in mind. To engage only in the here-and-now, to be concerned only with what is right in front of us, is to squander the gift that the consciousness of death gives us, we who are the only creatures who seem to be aware of our passing. To live a life that touches eternity even in the face of death is to make ourselves part of an eternal unfolding that stretches far beyond us into the unknown future.

"Repent one day before your death." The day is now. The time is short. We don't know how much we have left. We can't wait. Let us reconcile with the past, reach out in the present, and act for the future. Let us hear the fact of our death faintly tolling

[2] Psalm 90:12.

in the distance even in the midst of the vitality of our lives. And let us use this moment, now, before we come too close to it, to live with greater meaning than we ever thought possible.