

Preparing to Die

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination¹

This poem, “Life is a Journey,” by Rabbi Alvin Fine, was read every year on Yom Kippur in my childhood synagogue, and its words always haunted me. I was young, and I really did not want to be reminded that my life, which had only just begun, would someday end. I was already plenty afraid of death, anxious that my parents or grandparents would suddenly disappear, a fear brought into sharper focus when my mother’s father died suddenly of a heart attack when I was eight years old. To think of death – and particularly to think about my own eventual death, which I could scarcely imagine – was far too much for me. So I tried my best to put it out of my mind, to ignore it, or at least not bring it to mind often, to think about living and forget about dying.

We spend a lot of our time on this earth preparing for the next challenge in our lives, but despite the fact that we know no one gets out of this world alive, that death is the ultimate destination for ourselves as well as for every living thing on earth, we spend very little time preparing to die. In fact, we run from the incontrovertible fact of our death as hard as we can, doing everything in our power not to confront it. Some of us, though, are forced to face the inevitability of our end and cannot run. For some of us there is a severe diagnosis that carries with it an estimate of our survival, in months or weeks. For others of us the end point is not so clear, but age or physical conditions make it clear to us that although we may have several years ahead of us, we can see the arc of our lives bending to a close sooner rather than later. But for all of us it would do us good to consider the one thing we cannot deny about our lives: they end.

On Yom Kippur we symbolically prepare to die. Many of us wear a kittel or other white clothes, with which our bodies are traditionally dressed for burial after our deaths. We refrain from eating, as those who have died no longer have need of food. We recall, as we will in the Yizkor service shortly, those whom we have loved who have gone before us into death, showing us the way. And we meditate on our lives, their meaning and ultimate purpose. Today I want to talk about three ways that we can prepare ourselves to die, not because it will happen next week, next month, or next year, but because preparing for the end helps us live our lives more fully and to be more present in the time we do have left.

¹ From the poem “Life is a Journey” by Rabbi Alvin Fine z”l, the longtime rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco.

I: Reconciling

Rabbi Eliezer taught: Repent one day before your death.

His students asked him: Does a person know on which day they will die?

He said to them: All the more so, repent today lest you die tomorrow.²

T'shuvah or repentance is number one on the traditional list of things to do to prepare to die. There is even a traditional *vidui* or confessional to be said when one is facing death. The words of this special *vidui* acknowledge that the length of our time remaining on earth is not in our own hands. Therefore, it encourages us to turn, to reflect on our deeds during our lives, and to seek repair and reconciliation, where that is possible, with those whom we may have hurt, with those from whom we may have become estranged. Soberingly, the *vidui* also reminds us that where repair and reconciliation may not be possible, we ask that our death serve as the ultimate act of atonement. The *vidui* continues with the hope that those we love will be cared for, and that we will always be connected to them, even across the boundary between life and death, by the unbreakable bonds of love. It closes with the *Sh'ma*, reminding us that despite the many disjunctures that we experience in our time on this earth, when we face death we are united, we are accompanied, and we are One with those we love and with the divine.

The *vidui* is such a beautiful way to face death, but of all the times I have been with people as they die, only a very few have been willing to say the *vidui* themselves. Usually, they say that it's not time, not now, not yet, maybe later. But inevitably when the time arrives, they are at a place in the process where they are unable to speak the words, and I so often recite the version of the prayer that is for those who are unable to do so for themselves. Even at the end, we don't want to admit that the end is here. But the most important part of the *vidui* comes before its recitation anyway. It comes in those moments of actual reconciliation, where those who are dying are able to apologize to those they may have wronged, are able to say the words that before seemed impossible to say, are able to reconcile and embrace those from whom they have been estranged in little ways and big, before it is too late. The *vidui*, like the version we say today on Yom Kippur, is intended to come when all that can be done in that regard has already been done and we face the ultimate, knowing that the atoning power of death itself will make up for whatever we have not been able to do in this world.

To prepare to die is to truly take stock of our lives, just as we are asked to do every Yom Kippur, but in the face of death the process of *t'shuvah* comes with greater urgency. There may not be or even probably will not be a next year, a next Yom Kippur, another chance to return, to say the words, to untie the knotty relationships that we have carried with us up to this point. Now it may truly be one day before our death. Now is the time.

² Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 153a.

II: Reflecting

The good deeds that a person performs in this world, these are made into clothing of light from the supernal radiance, a garment to adorn them in the next world and to appear before the Holy Blessed One. In that garment that they wear, they are delighted by and gaze into the divine, as it is said [in Psalm 27], “to gaze at the pleasure of God and to dwell in God’s courtyards.” In this way, the soul is garbed in two worlds, so that it will be completed in all, in this world below and in the world above.³

When we review our lives in the process of *t’shuvah*, we concentrate on what we have done wrong, what is missing, relationships we have broken or failed to repair, sins, omissions, and failures. But preparing to die requires another kind of review, one suggested by this passage from the Zohar: a review of our good deeds, what has gone right, where we have succeeded, the connections we have nurtured, and the difference we have made by being alive. According to the Zohar, the good that we do in the world is not momentary; it does not disappear when it is completed. Instead, each good deed creates one tiny ray of light, and together they are stitched into a garment of light, a garment of our days, that we wear in the next world, the world after our death. Whatever we think about what comes next, the idea here is that the good deeds that we do survive us, that the light we bring into the world continues to shine long after we are gone from this life.

It is one thing to read this passage and to think about the idea of a shining “garment of days” or “garment of good deeds.” It is quite another thing to actually sit down and review what has gone right in our lives, to try ourselves to stitch together the pieces of that garment, to appreciate the beauty and positive impact of how we have lived. Hospice workers sometimes call this “life review,” a way of calling to our minds and coming to grips with the shape and flow of our lives, telling our own story to ourselves. What is important in this recounting of our story is the good that we did and the pleasurable times that we experienced, for forgoing the good and pleasurable in the world is, in the mind of the ancient rabbis, just as problematic as engaging in bad deeds, as it is said in the Talmud: “Rabbi Hizkiyah said in the name of Rav: You will one day give reckoning for everything your eyes saw which, although permissible, you did not enjoy.”⁴ We embrace the times that we engaged in the pleasures of life, with all of their materiality and messiness, knowing that we were not put on this earth simply to refrain from doing bad but also to actively seek and enjoy the good. When we can see before our own eyes the shining garment of days that we have created in this world, we are so much more prepared both to appreciate it and, inevitably, to leave it.

³ Zohar 2:229b (translation by Hartley Lachter, adapted).

⁴ Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 4:12.

III: Imagining

Each of us has a name
given by God
and given by our parents...
Each of us has a name
given by the sea
and given by our death.⁵

A third way to prepare ourselves to die is to consider our relationship to what is transcendent. How can we understand the path on which we walk as we approach death? What is the metaphor that we will latch onto, the image we will take with us, the name that we will choose to give the process of our departure from this world? How do we frame our dying to ourselves? Although it may seem simply like poetic license, how we talk about and imagine our death has a lot to do with providing it with meaning and us with comfort as we approach it. Jewish texts and traditions are full of metaphors and images that we can choose to make our own; it is up to us to see what resonates with us, what can support us and provide us with a framework in which to rest our minds and spirits. Some texts see the death of an individual as a wave returning to the ocean, our differentiated selves slipping back into the unity of the waters of life. Other texts imagine that the soul, having been given by God and placed in the body, flies free of the body and of material existence, returning to its divine source. We may imagine ourselves living on in nature, the star stuff of which we are made going on to inhabit many forms of life. Or we may think of our essence living on in the memories of our friends, our loved ones, our descendants, or those who learned from or with us. One of the metaphors that gives me comfort is thinking of ourselves as links in a chain that connects the past, those who gave to us an inheritance of love and care, of insight and understanding, with the future, those who will carry on the work and the love after us.

Once we have lit on a metaphor that speaks to us, a framing that helps add meaning to both our life and our death, it is important not only to hold onto it but also to share it, to communicate it to those around us and those we love. What is comforting to us may also be comforting to them, and it is also good for them to understand how we are thinking about dying so that they can support us in it, rather than offering other frameworks that may not speak to us. That can be helpful to us in earlier stages, as we begin the journey toward death, and also at moments of pain or struggle, when they can give us comfort by reflecting back to us the metaphor that resonates with us the most. This can provide us with the thing we seek most in preparing for death: a sense of *shalom*, of wholeness, of completion, of peace.

⁵ Zelda, "Each of Us Has a Name," translated by Marcia Falk.

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination
And life is a journey.

It is very difficult to make sense of a journey if we never look toward its destination. By preparing to die, we make it possible to infuse the journey of our lives with meaning through creative acts of reconciliation, reflection, and imagination as we look toward its end. We face death neither with eagerness nor with fear, but simply with the basic recognition that dying does not erase living, and that we can accept our end with grace, with serenity, and with peace.