

Yom Kippur : Dying Well

By Rabbi Shefa Gold

Years ago I worked for hospice, taking care of people who were dying. I attended to one person at a time until the end. These were people who couldn't afford a nurse, but they really needed loving attentive care. These were families that were stressed to their limits and often in a panic. My job was just to see and do what was needed and to bring a calm centered presence to a situation that seemed to be spinning out of control. My experience in doing this most difficult yet inspiring work was one of the forces that contributed to my calling as a rabbi. And what I learned as a companion to dying people is also exactly what I call on now as I receive the spiritual challenge of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Eliezer, one of our great sages, taught his disciples, "Turn one day prior to your death." And his students said to him, "Master, how can anyone know what day is one day prior to their death?" And his response to them was, "Therefore, turn today, because tomorrow you may die (Shabbat 153a)."

Yom Kippur is the day when we face the fact that "tomorrow you may die," and we face it so directly that turning, doing T'shuvah, moves to the top of our agenda.

On Yom Kippur, each of us can seriously contemplate the questions, "What would be left undone if I died today?" and, "How can I live most fully in whatever time is left?"

My first challenge in hospice work was not to be afraid. Only when I released my own fear of pain and death, was it possible to just be present to the truth before me. My real job was to bring a calm compassionate presence and then do the work that was given in each moment, even when the job was messy, even when the one I was serving couldn't respond in gratefulness or appreciation, even when the situation seemed tragic.

I learned that when the human dimension of dying is nurtured, for many the transition from life can become as profound, intimate and precious as the miracle

of birth. Yom Kippur marks our own transition from being stuck in the patterns of the past to being born into new possibilities.

One way to nurture the human dimension of the process of our dying is by finally allowing ourselves to be sad, to grieve, to move through our suffering. When we can really grieve, then it is possible to emerge from our suffering and fall into the waiting arms of our family and friends. Suffering can become the catalyst for dying well, and for being born into new connectivity. Sometimes our suffering may seem like the main obstacle to knowing the presence of God in our lives. When Life feels terrible we often just shut down, and close ourselves off from the possibility of Divine Love. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav looks into this same mystery and declares, "In the very obstacle that blocks you from discovering God is precisely where God is waiting to be discovered."

In my work in hospice I learned that dying from a progressive illness had provided the people I served with opportunities to resolve and complete their relationships and to get their affairs in order.

I noticed that the requirement of dying well might also be applied to our work here for Yom Kippur. Here are the requirements as I experience them, both for dying and for moving through the passage of Yom Kippur:

The first is saying, "I'm sorry," asking for forgiveness...

We learn through our mistakes. At the beginning of Yom Kippur we hear:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ: סְלַחְתִּי כַדְבַּרְךָ

V'yomer Adonai, salachti keedvarecha

And Adonai said, I have pardoned them as you have asked.

It is already a given on the Divine side of the equation. As we come back into connection, there is a sadness in having separated ourselves. We separate ourselves at times of anxiety, confusion, unconsciousness. In saying "I'm sorry," and feeling true remorse, we can begin to learn from our mistakes. Only when we say "I'm sorry," can we begin to receive the gift of Divine forgiveness.

The second requirement for dying well: forgiving everyone- those who hurt you, yourself, God, and life itself... Can you forgive life for not being what you

expected? Can you forgive Reality for constantly being in a state of flux? Can you forgive everyone who has disappointed you? Can you forgive yourself for not being the someone you thought you should be?

The third requirement for dying well: saying, “I love you,” This is not a statement of information. It’s a practice of encountering a miracle ... uncovering a treasure that may lie buried inside your heart. By saying, “I love you,” you dig up the treasure and let the light of awareness shine on it; you gain access to the power of your own love, so that it can move you in your actions and color your perceptions. Before my friend Rick died of malignant melanoma, he wrote in his journal, “I only pray that at the moment of Death my Love is stronger than my fear.” Our work is to keep on strengthening and affirming our Love, reminding each other often in the words of the Song of Songs, that “Love is as strong as Death.” Love is made stronger through expression.

The fourth requirement for dying well is acknowledging self-worth. You have been given a gift of incomparable worth and beauty: This amazing life, your creative powers, the ability to make meaning, ask questions, see beauty, nurture others. Can you acknowledge all the gifts you have received and all the good you have done simply by being your Self? Only when you realize how uniquely suited you are to fulfill your own potential, can you step into the new Life that is set before you.

The fifth requirement for dying well : saying “good-by.” By saying the Kol Nidre prayer, we are disavowing our old patterns; we’re saying goodbye to a way of being that wasn’t useful or life-affirming; we’re saying “good-by” to limited horizons so that we can open to new possibilities.

And the last requirement is the willingness and courage to venture into the unknown.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav once said, “All beginnings require that you unlock a new door.” What will it take to unlock the door to who you are becoming? Prayer? Laughter? Tears? Imagination? Dance? The words of our Ancestors?

So here are the requirements for dying well, and for doing the work of Yom Kippur:

Saying, "I'm sorry."

Forgiving.

Saying, "I love you."

Acknowledging self-worth

Saying, "Good-bye."

Stepping courageously into the Unknown.

Can we use this time that we are together for Yom Kippur which really is a 26 hour retreat, to address these requirements, to die well to the old self that we were, and enter into a new life, re-born, re-inspired and renewed?

Today we die together to old habits and step towards rebirth and renewal. Yom Kippur commemorates the startling moment when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and then emerges with the power of purification for the whole of Israel. Now that the Old Temple is gone, we are the ones who must leave our old lives behind, step into the void and come out of that process cleansed with a will to manifest our true destiny and fulfill our Divine potential.