

# WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

KOL NIDRE

Some of you know that my grandma, Millie Gordon, died this past spring at 98 years old. She died the way that she lived – with her intellect sharp and her spirit fiesty, her heart full and arms open, her love strong and her flirtations with the male doctors both charming and vaguely inappropriate. In a bizarre stroke of blessing, for which I will be forever grateful, I happened to be with her the last two days of her life, having flown down to Florida in the middle of the night to take her out to breakfast the next morning between east coast speaking engagements. She fell out of bed only a few hours after I arrived, breaking her hip and requiring emergency surgery.

I spent the next two days by her bedside in the hospital, putting drops of water on her dry lips, holding her hand and laughing as she tried to talk the male nurses into shaving their facial hair (“Why cover up that handsome punim with a beard? What a waste of a face!”).

Her last day, as she started to lose her vigor, I began to notice a trend among her caregivers. One after the next would stand by her and lovingly say to her, “Don’t worry, Mrs. Gordon – you’re going to be OK.” “Soon you’ll be back on your feet, playing bridge again with your ladies.” “Everything’s going to be just fine.” The more I heard, the more agitated I became. “Everything’s *not* going to be fine!” I finally said, too abruptly, to one nurse. “What if what she needs is for someone to tell her the truth?”

I recently heard a great, short TED talk from an Emergency Medical Technician named Matthew O’Reilly, who has spent many years responding to patients with serious and often fatal injuries. In many cases, people facing imminent and unexpected death would turn to him and ask: “Am I dying?” Matthew thought it was his responsibility to do whatever he could to diminish the terror and apprehension that often come with the awareness of imminent death. So he found himself lying to them, soothing them with promises that they’d be just fine.

One night he was called to the scene of a terrible motorcycle accident. A man had been gravely injured and asked if he was dying. This time, Matthew decided not to lie. He braced himself for the reaction. *You are dying.* To Matthew’s surprise, the man laid back with a look of calm, acceptance and peace. In that moment, Matthew realized that it was not his job to try to comfort the dying by lying to them. Instead, he saw that the greatest gift he could give them – as the last person they’d likely ever talk to – was the truth, painful as it was to hear.

Enter Yom Kippur. One day a year in which we essentially say to ourselves and one another: *I’m not going to lie to you. You are dying.*

Because we are all dying. It may be tomorrow. It may be in 60 years, but we’re all dying. Life is capricious. Unpredictable. Unfair. Is it anything more than chance that this one ends up with a mass of cancer cells in her breast, but that one’s biggest worry is how to juggle afterschool pickup on Mondays? That this one dies in a crash, alone, on the freeway on his way home from shul, but that one worries about finding a good seat for Kol Nidre?

I recently read David Harris-Gershon's memoir What Do you Buy the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife? The author's wife, who survived the terrorist attack at Hebrew University in 2002, had been sitting with two friends, Marla Bennet and Ben Blutstein (ז"ל) – friends of many in our community, when the bomb went off. They both died, but she survived. How? Just before the explosion she reached down to grab her Hebrew workbook to review one last time before going into her exam. Since she was reaching down, her head was shielded by the table for an instant – the very same instant that the bomb detonated. She was severely injured (“her clothes and skin scorched, her body punctured by shards of metal”) and it has taken years to recover, both physically and psychologically, but there's no question that the act of reaching down to grab her workbook off the floor in that precise moment spared her life.

We try so hard not to think of these things. To eradicate death from our consciousness and act as though everything is okay. Orderly. Predictable. We live in deep denial of the precariousness of our lives, developing elaborate mechanisms to avoid thinking about how close we may be to the end. We allow our lives to become consumed with trivialities, as if we'll live forever. The conflicts that deplete us, the struggles that distract us - so many of them are immaterial. Inconsequential. Irrelevant.

But one day a year, we confront the truth. One day a year, devoid of pretensions. One day without any lies. Stand at the edge of the abyss. Live for a day in full awareness that *it won't last*.

So here we are again tonight, empty handed in our whites, preparing to spend the next 24 hours hovering somewhere between life and death, staring into the void. Imagining, for one day, that today is our last.

Rabbi Eliezer famously instructs, “שׁוּב יוֹם אֶחָד לִפְנֵי מָוֶתְךָ – Return/ repent one day before you die” (Pirkei Avot 2:10). You don't want to die with open wounds on the heart. Unsaid words. Just do the hard work before it's too late.

But what exactly does that mean? his students ask. How are we to know when we'll die, so that we can schedule the requisite hours for repentance the day before?

All the more so, R' Eliezer answers. All the more so – do the work today – just in case tomorrow is the day. If you live like this, you won't regret it (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 153a).

As long as the lamp still burns, says Yalkut Shimoni (on Kohelet 9:8), add oil to it before it goes out. Once the lamp is extinguished, all that oil will be to no avail.

I love a tradition that, in place of Eat, Drink and Be Merry, for Tomorrow You May Die says Make Teshuvah, Tend to the Shattered Remains of Your Marriage, Call Your Mother, for Tomorrow You May Die.

Over the past few months we have heard in agonizing detail about the spread of Ebola, tearing through West Africa. As I read each news story, stories of parents forced to leave their children outside the home to die alone, stories of doctors and nurses being struck down as they tried desperately to save lives, stories of terror and heartache and devastation that remind us of

scenes from Contagion, I can't help but think of the people I met in Liberia two summers ago when I travelled there with American Jewish World Service. I think of the women who fought so courageously for peace, those who dedicated themselves to the reconciliation efforts to try to bring some healing after 14 years of civil war, the teenage girls who found their voices and their courage in a land of rampant sexual abuse. The people whose faith was so deep and indestructible that they never gave up hope, even in the darkest days. People whose stories are permanently etched into my heart and mind, those whom I pray for every single day.

One of the women I met that summer was named Ma Ani, as in Mama Ann. When she told us her story, she spoke with a soft voice – I had to stretch to understand what she was saying. I will share with you tonight her story as I remember it; I only hope I can do it justice. She was home with her husband and children when rebels stormed her house during the war. Her husband and two of her children were murdered before her eyes, she was shot in the leg and badly wounded. The attackers ransacked the house and left Ma Ani to die on the floor. Only after they left did her two smallest children emerge from their hiding place, unharmed, and the sight of these two children gave her strength and the will to live. She lifted them both up in her arms, grabbed what meager resources she could hold, and dragging her wounded leg behind her, she set out to Monrovia, to the big city, to find help.

Once she reached the city, she found herself once again on the cusp of despair. How could she possibly keep the children safe? Where would they live? What would they eat? Maybe by grace, maybe by luck she found a group of women who taught her how to bead, and she learned to make beautiful purses, which she was able to sell. Soon she was making enough money to feed her children, and when the war ended, she was able to send them to school. By the time I met her, ten years later, she still walked with a limp, but her face shone with immense pride as she announced that her young son, the boy who rode to Monrovia on her back, was preparing to graduate high school.

She had the kind of grace and humility that takes your breath away. I hugged her and blessed her and told her that her name – Ma Ani – means, in Hebrew, *what am I*. That I would share her story with my children and our community, that it would be, forever, a reminder that we are all called, at various moments in our lives, to ask ourselves: *ma ani?* What am I, really? What is my life for? And I told her that I prayed we would all find the strength to respond to that question as courageously as she did – with deep faith and an affirmation of our own worth.

*Ma ani?* This question is asked most famously by Hillel – רבשנאני לעצמי מה אני - *if I am only for myself, what am I?* (Pirke Avot 1:14), meaning, I believe, that our lives are in some ways defined by the attachments we allow ourselves to have. The love we share. Who we let in. Ultimately, we are not *who* we love, but we are *that* we love.

And we are that we fight – for ourselves, but not only for ourselves. Think of the character in Alan Paton's *Ah But Your Country is Beautiful* who imagines that one day he'll be asked: "Where are your wounds?" And if I say I haven't any, God will say, "Was there nothing to fight for?"

*Ma ani* – what am I? This is, more than anything else, the question that we are called to ask ourselves today. That’s why at the very end of Yom Kippur, when the Gates are closing and we take to our feet and use every last bit of strength to cry out, the words we say are *מָה אֲנִי, מָה חֲסִידֶיךָ*... According to one position in the Talmud, these are the *only* suitable words we can offer when the veil has been lifted, when we see with such clarity how vulnerable we really are: What am I? What are we? Is this what I am here for?

Last month many of us lost a friend who dwelt in the heart of life, who was elegant and eloquent, an artist and a writer. Her laugh was vivid and strong. She taught her friends to splurge on fine restaurants, to drink great wine, to slow down and breathe. As cancer spread throughout her body, she began to write in earnest. She blogged about an experience that she had at Commonweal, a retreat center for cancer patients in northern California and one of the holiest places I have visited. She learned there that our task, in life, is to attempt to discern what we most want our lives to be about, and then, by envisioning it, do everything we can to bring it into being for whatever time we have.

What is your soul calling you to do? What is the mission, the meaning, only you can fulfill? Where have you hidden away your most profound desires and aspirations? Can you unearth them? Most importantly, how are you actively thwarting their accomplishment? Yes, that is the challenge—figuring out all the ways we work against ourselves.

We so assiduously sabotage the very thing that would bring us the most satisfaction: “I can’t now... I’m too busy... It won’t work... I have to... I can’t.” (<http://bmatzav.blogspot.com>)

Why is it so difficult for us to find this kind of clarity when we are not in crisis or cancer treatment?

One person wrote so courageously and honestly in our Elul Regret Book that when he was diagnosed with cancer last year his whole life came into sharp focus. His love of his daughter and wife was so profound and vivid he could almost touch it. And then when he got the news that the initial diagnosis was incorrect and his tumor was, thank God, benign, he reported that his sense of gratitude, of wonder and connectedness faded as quickly as the setting sun. “The whole way in which I experience the world and its many blessings has become less acute, less immediate.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that the human being is “uniquely graced with the ability to search the soul and reflect, For what purpose am I alive? Does my life have a meaning, a reason? Is there a need for my existence? Will anything on earth be impaired by my disappearance? Would my absence create a vacuum in the world?” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Pikuach Neshama- To Save a Soul*)

And the Slonimer Rebbe teaches that every single person has a unique mission, and every effort, every breath must be dedicated to discerning and then fulfilling my life’s mission. “One who lacks this clarity of personal mission is like someone who wanders aimlessly in the streets,

not knowing where he wants to go.” Many of us know this feeling all too well. (Netivot Shalom, Awareness ch. 6)

All of these voices are telling us the same thing – the very thing we have so much trouble hearing: You have something to do in this world. What’s holding you back from doing it?

In September of 1958, Martin Luther King, Jr. was at a book signing in Harlem when a woman approached him. "Are you Martin Luther King?" she asked. "Yes," he said. She took out a knife and stabbed him in the chest.

King was rushed to the hospital and the doctors found that the tip of the blade was on the edge of his aorta, the main artery of his heart. Had it been punctured, he would have died immediately. The next morning, the newspapers reported that had he so much as sneezed, he would have died.

As he was recovering, King received hundreds of letters in the hospital - letters from the President, the Vice President, the Governor of New York. But there was one he said he would never forget. It read:

Dear Dr. King,

I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School. While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze.

A decade later, King delivered his famous "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech – the last speech before his assassination the next morning. In that speech, he shared the story and said:

I want to say tonight that I too am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters...

...I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom... or in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation, and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance... to tell America about a dream that I had had...

I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.

Ten years later, King could see that every day of his life he had been witness – and catalyst - to something extraordinary.

On Sunday, when we gathered at the beach for tashlikh, I shared the old story of the flood coming to town and the residents being ordered to evacuate. “Don’t worry about me,” one man said, “God will save me.” As the flood waters rose, he climbed to the second floor of his house when some police in a boat rowed by and shouted for him to climb into the boat. “Thank you very much,” he said, “but I’m ok - God will save me.” Finally as the whole house was nearly submerged in water a rescue helicopter flew by overhead and shouted to the man, now perched on the roof, “Jump on to the rope ladder – we can help you!” “That’s quite alright,” he replied. “I’m waiting here for God to save me.”

You all know the story. In the next scene the man appears before the Throne of Judgment and challenges God: “I had perfect faith! How could you abandon me!” “Are you out of your mind?” God asks. “I sent you evacuation orders, I sent you police in a boat, I sent you rescue workers in a helicopter. What more did you expect me to do?”

That poor man died waiting. Waiting for a sign. Waiting for salvation. Waiting for God to manifest in precisely the way he had imagined.

I asked us to think about what we were waiting for. What was holding us back – keeping us from grabbing hold of the rescue ladder and saving ourselves? Within 5 minutes, 300 of you wrote what you were waiting for. It’s true that two of you were waiting for dinner, one of you was waiting for a good night’s sleep without Atavan, one was waiting for Star Wars Episode VII and someone – I’m pretty sure my son – was waiting for his new Lego set.

But in addition to those, you said you were waiting for someone to tell you that you’re beautiful. For someone to tell you to write. For someone to tell you that you could be the leader of your own band. You were waiting for someone to tell you that are loveable, so that you can give up the trope your mother gifted to you. For your family to accept you, just as you are.

You were waiting to not be so sad anymore. To figure out what you really want to be when you grow up so that you can get start doing it already. To stop being so critical of yourself. To forgive yourself for your friend’s death.

Here’s what I was struck by: This was not a month long exercise. It was instantaneous. I asked, you wrote. All of that waiting living just beneath surface. We’re all, apparently, actively waiting for something.

So let me ask you tonight– I know now what you are waiting for, but given Ebola and ISIS and life’s radical unpredictability, given cancer and car accidents and climate change and the fragility of it all, *what are you waiting for?*

“The fact of dying,” wrote Heschel, “must be a major factor in our understanding of living...” (Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity). In other words, we dwell on the cusp of death today not because we are death obsessed, but because we are life obsessed.

Sometimes we have to stand at the edge of death in order to figure out how desperately we want to hold on to life, how precious and perilous it all is, how essential and urgent that we stop waiting and start living.

I don't want us to miss out on life. I don't want us to waste time. Life is too precious - of this I am certain. So I want to stand here tonight and tell you:

You really ought to be the leader of your own band!

You are *not* unloveable! Free yourself from the poison of your mother's trope.

It's time to forgive yourself for your friend's death. Your guilt won't bring your friend back, and it only stands in the way of your grieving. Instead, do something to make your friend's memory a blessing.

Even if your family is never able to accept you, I do. This community does, and God does. Just the way you are.

And yet, it's clear that even though you report that that you're waiting for someone else to tell you these things, someone else to set you free, we both know that what you really need is to hear this from yourself.

Listen for those words tonight. Listen for them tomorrow. Take the day to block out the noise from the outside, so that you can hear the quiet voice crying out from the inside.

It is for precisely this reason that we - sometime secular, sometime atheistic, sometime cynical Jews, go through this annual ritual soul cleanse. Surely there are more comfortable ways for us to spend the next day. But we walk, together and apart, to the edge - because somewhere we know that there is something each of us is called to do in this world of terror and heartache and isolation and greed and disconnection and love and miracles and incredible beauty. Some part of our heart holds space for the possibility that each of us is called to greatness, that my community and maybe the world will be impoverished if I am not me. That for all of my waiting for someone else to tell me what and who I am and can be, it just might be time for me to stop waiting and tell myself. Because somewhere in our hearts we know that it really ought to matter if we sneeze.

Let's go together to the brink. And then step back - we'll pull one another back - in an act of spiritual defiance. Let this day be an awakening. A reminder. A call to those who still have life and breath in us that it's precarious but we are still alive. And there is still a lot loving, a lot of fighting, a lot of forgiving and a lot of living to be done.

*Ma ani?* What am I? And what am I waiting for?