

Yom Kippur Morning 5772
Rabbi Steven Z. Leder
Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Los Angeles, CA

Last night I said that “*L’chaim*—to life—is the most important phrase in the Hebrew language and the most fundamental of all Jewish ideas. We rejoice in life. But today is about death. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for death, our own death. Traditional Jews wear white on Yom Kippur to simulate the white, linen burial shroud they will be sewn into at the time of death. We neither eat nor drink because the dead neither eat nor drink. We imagine a book in which our destiny for the year ahead is sealed. All of this is meant to conjure that most frightening possibility...that we will not be alive at this time next year.

A rabbi whose 30 year old son recently died told me, “When people said, ‘I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose a child,’ it annoyed me.” He knew the truth. Every parent imagines his or her child dying. Maybe it’s the first terrible flu or fall, maybe when they are long past due and a ringing phone pierces the night. Every parent has imagined the worst.

We all imagine the immense, crushing grief of a dead child, spouse, parent or friend. We imagine the funeral, the coffin, the wailing. A lot of us have already walked the Valley of the Shadows and lowered a loved one’s body into the dark, silent ground. Death crushes us...as least for a while. Today is meant to crush us with an even graver reality. Today is about imagining our own death.

Sometimes, I feel people drifting away during services. I understand. But there’s one moment when there’s no daydreaming, the moment when we read, “*Who by water, who by fire, who by earthquake?*” If that prayer was written today we would add, “Who by cancer, who by stroke, who by automobile?” Then that final, simple question; the question that is the essence of this day. “*Who shall live and who shall die?*”

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeshutz who died in 1764, was famous not only among Jews but among Christians as well, for his great learning. One Shabbat morning, the Rabbi was walking to the synagogue when he encountered the Burgomaster of Prague, a prince of the royal family. “Rabbi, where are you going at such an early hour?” asked the prince.

“Your Excellency,” replied the Rabbi, “I know not where I am going.”

The noble thought the Rabbi was being flippant, so he ordered him arrested for public disrespect to the authorities. As he was being marched away in irons, the Rabbi said to the Burgomaster, “Your Excellency, you now see that I did not know where I was bound, for I thought I was going to the synagogue, and I am instead evidently going to the gallows.”

At this the prince smiled and released him.

“You see,” continued the Rabbi, “I thought I was on my way to synagogue, then to the executioner, and now I am once again on my way to the synagogue. None of us ever really knows where we are going.”

Of course, it’s more than a story about a rabbi and a prince. It’s a story about never knowing which day will be our last.

But what if we did? What if we did know, as Yom Kippur forces us to imagine, that we were going to die...and I do not mean in years or decades. What would it be like to know, to really know, that this year, is our last? That’s what we’re supposed to contemplate today. What’s it like? What happens? How does it feel, when we know we are going to die?

Here’s what Richard Elias felt. He was on the plane that crash landed in the Hudson River a couple of years ago.

“Imagine a big explosion as you climb through 3,000 feet. Imagine a plane full of smoke. Imagine an engine going clack, clack, clack, clack. It sounds scary. I had a unique seat that day. I was sitting in 1D. I was the only one who could talk to the flight attendants. I looked at them nervously, and they said, “No problem. We probably hit some birds.” The pilot had already turned the plane around. We were approaching Manhattan.

Two minutes later, three things happened at the same time. The pilot lined up the plane with the Hudson River. Not the usual route. He turned off the engines. Now imagine being in a plane with no sound. And then he said three words -- the most unemotional three words I've ever heard. “Brace for impact.” I didn't have to talk to the flight attendant anymore. I could see terror in her eyes. Life was over.

I learned three things about myself that day. I learned that it all changes in an instant. We all have a bucket list, things we want to do, people we want to

reach out to, fences we want to mend, experiences we want to have, mountains we want to climb but never did. As I thought about this later on, I came up with a saying, which is, "Don't collect good wine." Because if the wine is good and the person is there, I'm opening it. I no longer want to postpone anything in life. And that urgency, that purpose, has really changed my life.

The second thing I learned that day was a deep regret. I've lived a good life. In my own humanity and mistakes, I've tried to get better in many ways. But in my human frailty, I also allowed my ego to flourish. As the plane plummeted, I regretted the time I wasted on things that did not matter with people that did not matter. I thought about my relationship with my wife, with my friends, with others. As I reflected, I decided to eliminate negative energy from my life. Today it isn't perfect, but it's a lot better. I haven't had a fight with my wife in two years. It feels great. I no longer try to be right; I choose to be happy.

The third thing I learned -- and this was as my mental clock started counting down to impact, "15, 14, 13..." I could see the water coming. I said to myself, 'Please blow up. I don't want this thing to break in 20 pieces.' We are coming down and I had this sense of, wow, dying is not scary. It was almost as if I had been preparing for it my entire life. But it was very sad. I didn't want to go; I love my life. And all that sadness is framed in one thought. I only wish for one thing. I only wish I could see my kids grow up.

A month later, I am at a performance by my first grade daughter and I'm balling, I'm crying, like a little kid. And it made all the sense in the world to me. I realized at that point, by connecting those two dots, that the only thing that matters in my life is being the best dad I can be. Above all, that is the only goal I have in life.

I was given the gift of life that day. I was given another gift, which was to be able to see into the future and come back and live differently. Next time you fly, imagine the same things happening on your plane. How would you change your relationships and the negative energy in them? And more than anything, are you being the best person you can?"

The ancient rabbis could not imagine an airplane or use it as a metaphor, but they would have agreed with the sentiment. Because an airplane crash wakes us up and today is supposed to wake us up. The shofar is supposed to wake us up. The idea of a book in which our destiny is sealed is supposed to wake us up. Now, now is the time to look, to really, really look at our lives and the people we love.

That is the greatest gift Yom Kippur can bestow upon us. A reminder, a reminder in the hurry and the worry and the scurry of our everyday lives to look, to really look at each other. To realize how wonderful it is just to be, and to know, and to love and to laugh. So let's wake up and look at one another. I saved one thing from my list last night to say to you today. If ever I had something to say to you, it is just this...look at one another.

From this Yom Kippur to the next, let's look at one another. Let's look at one another each day as if it were the last time. No matter how much we may have looked in the past, it is never enough. Let's look at each other. Let's touch each other. Let's cherish each other's presence, each moment we are together—husband and wife, parent and child, brother, sister and friend. Let's look at each other with new wonder, new feeling, new love. This day to imagine our deaths is really meant to change our lives. Reminding us to look at and love each other more. Reminding us to be grateful for the simple blessing of life itself. Reminding us to look...to really look at each other.