Afterlife - Yom Kippur, 2007

The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on September 22, 2007

I don't know how many of you caught what happened in China about a month ago. To most of us in the West, it sounds patently absurd. China has passed a law banning Buddhist monks in Tibet from reincarnating without government permission. Only Buddhist monks living inside China can seek reincarnation. In other words, if you are a Buddhist monk in Tibet, you are not allowed to die and come back to life in Tibet without permission of the Chinese government.

In order to understand this law, you have to understand a bit about Buddhist monks and a bit about China's relationship to Tibet. This is actually a political issue, not strictly a religious one.

Buddhists believe that the soul of the Dalai Lama will be reborn as a new human being to continue the work of relieving suffering in the world. Buddhists also believe that the Dalai Lama is able to choose where he will be reborn. China's goal is to cut off the influence of the current Dalai Lama who is Tibet's exiled spiritual and political leader. He refuses to be reborn in Tibet as long as it is under Chinese control. So this law gives the Chinese the power to choose the next Dalai Lama. It is even possible that there could be two Dalai Lamas, one chosen by the Chinese government and one chosen by Buddhist monks.

If you find this confusing, you are not alone. We liberal Jews just don't spend too much time thinking about reincarnation. It's just not the kind of thing Jews ask much about - or used to, at least. Most liberal Jews are more sympathetic to the focus of the late humorist Art Buchwald who on his deathbed said these words: "I have no idea where I'm going, but here's the real question: What am I doing here in the first place?" Because whatever you believe about life after death, Judaism believes that it is this life that matters.

These days, I hear more questions than ever before about what Judaism believes about life after death. A recent Gallup poll said 20% of all U.S. adults believe in reincarnation. 25% of U.S. Christians embrace it as their favored "end of life" view. Statistics tell us that we American Jews are more likely to believe in life after death than earlier in the century in part because we are impacted by the surrounding Christian culture that believes in afterlife. We are not the only ones so influenced. According to Professor Ann Swidler, a sociologist in California, Taiwanese Buddhists in America have a similar conflict. When Christians ask them what they believe about heaven, they go and ask the monks what Buddhism believes about heaven the way Jews go and ask rabbis.

When Rabbi Harold Schulweis spoke recently to a group, he said: "You ask what I believe about the afterlife and I in turn am struck by the fact that yours is a question rarely asked by

Jews. It is different with Christian audiences where inquiries about the Jewish view of life after death are almost invariably the first questions posed." (p. 209, The American Rabbi)

He asks himself: "How is it that as a rabbi called upon to officiate at funerals, deliver eulogies, comfort the bereaved, I am rarely questioned about the disposition of the soul after death or the place of Heaven or Hell, or the belief in the physical resurrection of the dead? How is it that in the discussion about the meaning of the Holocaust and the destruction of one-third of our people, the Jewish position on the hereafter plays no part?" He answers his own question by saying that, "The Torah makes no explicit reference to another world beyond the grave." He adds, as further proof, that we Jews at the funeral cut the fringes of the prayer shawl that is placed around the shoulders of the deceased. That custom symbolizes the belief that the deceased have no mitzvoth, no deeds to be fulfilled, that death is final.

And yet while Rabbi Schulweis is right that the Bible makes no explicit reference to afterlife, it is after Biblical times that an idea of an afterlife did develop in mainstream Judaism. Initially the idea was that the Jewish people would be an eternal people and would achieve afterlife as a people; then the idea shifted in the rabbinic period to afterlife for individuals.

Rabbi Neil Gillman, in his book *The Death of Death* wrote, "Eschatology is central to the Jewish religious myth. And central to Jewish eschatology is the doctrine of an afterlife for each Jew. That doctrine, as it developed over time, taught that our death is not final, that at the end of days God will raise our bodies from the grave, reunite them with our souls and reconstitute us as we were during our lifespan on earth, that we will be brought before God to account for our lives and receive the appropriate reward or punishment…at that point, death will die." (p.34)

When there is a terrorist attack in Israel, you see television footage of Hasidim retrieving body parts. That's so that the body parts can be buried with their owner in anticipation of physical resurrection of the dead. I promise you that in the Reform temple where I grew up, we weren't taught that there was an actual physical afterlife. We were taught that we lived on in our deeds. I still feel pretty comfortable with that idea. But not long ago, even a liberal Reform theologian as famous as Eugene Borowtiz wrote in his book *Liberal Judaism*, "I do not know … how I shall survive, what sort of judgment awaits me, or what I shall do in eternity. I am, however inclined to think that my hope is better spoken of as resurrection rather than immortality for I do not know my self as a soul without a body but only as a psychosomatic self. Perhaps even that is more than I can honestly say…Ultimately I trust in what I have experienced of God's generosity, so surprising and overwhelming so often in my life. In such moments I sing whole-heartedly the last stanza of the hymn, Adon Olam. 'In God's hand I place my soul both when I sleep and when I wake, and with my soul, my body. God is with me. I shall not fear.'"

So the idea is there if you want it even in liberal Judaism. I just can't get excited about it. I will recommend books to you, if you are interested. I will invite you to confirmation class when we study afterlife. But I am still more preoccupied with Art Buchwald's question, what

are you doing here in the first place? Because even those who do believe in afterlife agree that the Jewish focus is always on this world.

To be alive is to consciously consider your legacy; why are you here and what do you want to leave behind? To be alive is to have deeds to perform and imperatives to be followed - that is the essence of Judaism regardless of what you believe about life after death. Leonard Fein wrote a column in The Forward recently about a Mexican Jew named Daniel Lubetzky who graduated from Stanford Law School in 1993. Lubetsky founded an organization called One Voice, and maybe - just maybe - it's the most practical idea around. Suppose, Lubetzky thought, we can get a lot of people - say for example 1 million - on both sides, Palestinians and Israelis, to sign a joint statement of principle. And suppose we were then to put before all who've signed, a set of policy propositions and ask them to vote on each. And suppose a broad consensus could be generated regarding the propositions. Might that not shift the current imbalance of power between extremism and moderation? Might not sufficient momentum thereby be generated to impel politicians to heed the express will of their people?

It turns out that so far, 548,692 people - [almost equally divided between Israelis and Palestinians] have signed on to the framing pledge. [Their goal is to gather 1,000,000 signatures.] More than that, last month, smack in the middle of the ongoing mayhem in Gaza, 14,000 Gazans added their names to the list. The pledge: In its most basic version, an affirmation of the rights of both peoples to independence, national security, personal safety, sovereignty, freedom, dignity, respect and economic viability and a call on the political leadership to immediately commence negotiations and implement a two state solution to the conflict.

There are ten propositions. The first and arguably the most important endorsed by 76% of both Palestinians and Israelis says Israel will be the state of the Jewish people and Palestine the state of the Palestinian people, each recognizing the other as such, both democratic and respecting human rights, including minority rights.

How is *One Voice* doing this? By grassroots organizing and by training youth pledged to live in mutual regard. Their latest publicity has Arab and Israeli youth together looking out at the camera and asking: what are you willing to do to end the conflict? They have a major event planned for Oct. 18, One Million Voices to end the conflict, the largest simultaneous mobilization of Israelis and Palestinians in the history of the region. Via live, internally broadcast public summits in Israel, Palestine and communities worldwide, One Million Voices to end the conflict. I have no idea what Lubetzky thinks about afterlife, but I do know that Lubetzky took seriously the question: What are you doing here in the first place?

If you do want to live on after you are gone, that is the way to do it, in what you do here. You make life better on this earth, you try to help others find meaning in their lives. You have to be able to think big if you want to achieve immortality in your lifetime. What I really love is the suggestion made by the late philosopher Robert Nozick who speculated that "a person's dying energy could bubble into a new universe made in that person's image." His suggestion:

first imagine what form of immortality would be most desirable, then live that life in the present as though it were already a reality.

This isn't as crazy as it sounds. We have done this in our recent history. Before the state of Israel became a reality 60 years ago, someone had to imagine that it could exist. Before this congregation became a reality 60 years ago, someone had to imagine that it could exist. Those "someones" lived what they imagined and created two versions of living immortality that gave meaning to their lives and meaning to those of us who have inherited them.

If you think about it, we all want some version of immortality, we all want to say that what we did here had meaning. Some of this we can plan. We can make sure this temple is here after we are gone. Being a member now is actually a way of creating immortality in the future. But not all versions of immortality have to be on such a grand scale.

One of our members told me the story of her mother: "She was plunging deeper and deeper into her Alzheimer's disease and found it impossible to do the things grandmothers think are essential, like buy presents and take the grandchildren places. When the kids were in camp (and sometimes when they were home, too) my mother would cut words and pictures out of magazines, paste them on paper, usually in circles and other patterns, and send her "letters" to the kids in this crazy, mixed-up form. My children never got any other "presents" from my mother, but they knew she loved them profoundly and that love was returned by them with intensity and with joy."

Her children, now adults, have never forgotten those letters she so lovingly crafted for them. Her immortality lives on in that loving memory.

I think I once told you about a letter my grandmother wrote to my mother in 1980 when Grandma was 84. My mother found it a few years ago with some old papers in a safe deposit box:

Gert, Dear,
In case I am incapacitated: My treasury bond $10,000 repurchase agreement is due on Sept. 6. Please cash it. It is in the vault in Deal, but I do all business in Long Branch. The bank, NJ National, is on the corner of Memorial Parkway and Broadway. I'll be able to pay taxes and sewerage on August 1 but the next due date is on Nov. 1. The bills are in the envelopes. My heating oil is in. In case I leave, I want all my personal possessions to go to you. Aside from my sterling silver, there isn't much. Probably you'll give Kaki some china. There is a good Lenox platter, my Tiffany urn, and the silver and crystal flower container.
She signs it: Love, Mother
Then comes the P.S.: When Ellen's baby comes, please give her enough money for two weeks nursing when she comes home.

And then she ends with the date: August, 1979, five months before Gideon was born. Grandma didn't think she would live to see her first great-grandson, so she planned how her love would continue after her death. She never thought she would live to be 102. She was living her immortality long before she had to; and that is what Yom Kippur reminds us to do,

to live each day as if this day might be our last. That is what Nozick means when he tells us to imagine what form of immortality would be most desirable and then live that life in the present as though it were already a reality.

For us, death is always a tragedy even if we talk so confidently about afterlife. You will never hear "she has gone to a better place" at a Jewish funeral. At a Jewish funeral, you will never hear poignant words like those uttered recently by Benito Perrone whose wife died at the World Trade Center on 9/11: "Our family will never feel complete again until God unites us in heaven."

You will, however, hear Jewish humor that shows how we value life and view deth a a tragedy. Rabbi Maurice Lamm tells the story of a man in his mid-seventies who was left all alone in a shtetl in Poland before the Second World War. All his children had immigrated to America. He had a hard time finding shelter and food.

Every morning, he would pick up sticks and put them in his burlap bag. Just before sunset, he would take this bag to the wood merchant who would buy it for a kopek or two and sell it to the villagers. One hot July day, he trudged from morning to night, picking up sticks. As he was putting his last stick in his bag, the burlap broke and all the sticks fell to the ground. Tired, frustrated and disgusted, he looked up to heaven and said, "God, what do I need this for? You might as well send the Malach ha Mavet, the Angel of Death, to take me." Instantly, the Angel of Death appeared at his side and asked, "Did you call?" "Yes," said the man. "What can I do for you?" asked the angel of death. The man looked at the malach ha mavet and replied: "You can help me pick up these sticks."

In a different kind of bid for immortality, but in an equally Jewish way of acknowledging death with humor, and giving his son an ethical and religious message about life, columnist Jacob Medjuck's father complained about his birthday this year. "I'm 63," he said on the phone, "63." "63," I said, "you're young." And he explained: If you had a son tomorrow, I would be 76 at the bar mitzvah. 76! But you can't have a son tomorrow, it takes nine months to bear children - and you don't even have a girlfriend! Let's say instead you just met the girl tonight, I'm 77, 78 at the bar mitzvah, but she's not the right one - or you're not the right one, which is more likely, Jacob. So let's say you finally find the right girl in two years, now I'm 79 I'm 80 at he bar mitzvah. Let's say you want to travel for a year, have kids later. I'm 81, 82. And when you finally do get pregnant…it's a girl! [Apparently Jacob's father hadn't heard of bat mitzvah] 83, 84, on to your second kid, 85. I'm 85 at the bar mitzvah. And that's if you get it all right - which you've never done. I'm 85 if it all goes perfect. What goes perfect? Nothing. So here's the new plan: Do you remember when we told you to go out and find a girl who loves you? The right girl for you? A woman who will take care of you, who will let you take care of her? Someone fun, all the good stuff? Good. Forget that. Go find anyone. Tonight even. Your mother and I have put aside some money, and we will take care of everything. Make a baby, make a boy, make two, and with luck I will be at the bar mitzvah." This is our typical backhanded way of saying we value this life and we want to see concrete proof that we will live on.

The Jewish value is always to choose life whenever there is a choice regardless of what might come later. Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who went on to become a famous psychologist. He was awakened in the middle of the night by a phone call from a man threatening suicide. He insisted that Frankl gave him a good reason why he should not kill himself. Frankl offered every reason he could think of, and finally persuaded the caller to meet at an all-night coffee shop in a nearby neighborhood. The two sat and talked for a while.

Frankl asked, "Why did you call? Had you read my books?"

"No," responded the man. "Actually I have never heard of you. I was in trouble and needed someone, so I picked your name out of the psychiatric listings in the phone book."

A little taken back, Frankl asked, "Well, which of my arguments convinced you not to commit suicide and to meet me?"

The man looked abashed. "Dr Frankl, I do not mean to offend you, " he said. But not a single argument of yours changed my mind. None of them was enough to persuade me to live."

Frankl was exasperated and asked, why did you decide to live?

The man answered, "I called you in the middle of the night. You did not know me at all, yet you spent hours on the phone and even met me in a coffee shop before dawn. I thought that if my life could mean so much to a complete stranger, it ought to mean something to me, too."

What are you doing here in the first place? Your life has meaning when you live so that it has meaning. That is within your control. Is afterlife a possibility? Sure. Is resurrection a possibility? Why not. But do you want to sit around waiting for it to happen? You bet you don't. So it's fun to wonder where in the world the present Dalai Lama will be reincarnated. With 130,000 Tibetan exiles spread throughout India, Europe and North America, and with an estimated 8000 Tibetans living in the US, it could even be here. But I'm still more interested in Art Buchwald. For a funny guy, he had a very difficult life. His father went broke in the Depression. His mother was institutionalized shortly after his birth. He and his sisters were shuttled between orphanages and foster homes. He battled depression. And: He actually had an afterlife in this life. On Feb. 8, 2006 he checked into hospice suffering from kidney failure. He refused dialysis. He wrote a column called "Goodbye, my friends" that he asked to be distributed after his death. Doctors gave him weeks to live. And then he got better which you are not supposed to do in hospice. After 6 weeks, his insurance company stopped paying for hospice. He entertained friends. He ate more cheesecake. He even had time to write a final book: *Too Soon to Say Goodbye. He didn't die until January 17, 2007, almost a year after he had received his death sentence. He believed it's what you do on Earth and the good deeds you do here that's important. In an interview with his friend Mike Wallace, Wallace asked Buchwald about his legacy. What did he most want to leave behind? And this man who had suffered so much in his life, who had lost a leg to diabetes, who had outlasted the doctor's predictions gave him this answer: "Joy, that's what I am going to leave behind." That is the real Jewish position on afterlife: In the face of death, live with joy.*

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