

## Yom Kippur 2001-5762 Sermon - Happy Death

*The following is the text of the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis on Yom Kippur:*

Malachy McCourt, the brother of the famous Frank, tells the story of a time he picked up an old man on the road during a hard rainfall. When the man got out of the car, he said an odd thing to McCourt: "Thank you sir for your kindness. May you have a happy death." McCourt thought about this strange blessing and then concluded he liked it, for a happy death means you had a happy life. But how would you measure a happy life?

The Talmud tells us to be prepared to answer these questions when we leave this world: "Did you conduct your business faithfully? Did you set fixed times for Torah study? Did you participate in raising a new generation? Did you maintain hope for salvation? ... Did you understand one thing from another?" Notice that you will not be asked, "Did you lead a happy life?"

Implicit in the Talmud's questions is the idea that, if your life goals are meaningful, your life and death will be happy ones. We ask ourselves this question every year on Yom Kippur but this year the question has been brought home to us more vividly than ever before: If your life were to end tomorrow, would you have a happy death?

All these questions challenge you to consider your legacy now, while you still have time. I'm sure I've told the story before of Alfred Nobel, the Swiss chemist whose wealth came from his invention of powerful explosives used by governments to make weapons. When his brother died, the newspaper accidentally published Alfred's obituary and he didn't like what he read. He had to ask himself whether he had conducted his business faithfully; and the answer to that question led to his vow that he would live so that he would be remembered in connection with peace, not war. That is why he established the Nobel Prize for peace.

But you don't have to be Alfred Nobel to make a difference in the world. Alfred Nobel discovered a second chance to have a happy death. Today is your second chance to decide what kind of life would be meaningful. Mordechai Gafni, in his book Soul Prints, suggests what he calls a SOUL PRINT PRACTICE:

Take a moment, see if you can do this.

Name the five wealthiest people in the world.

Name the last five winners of the Miss America contest.

Name the last five people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize.

Name the last half dozen Academy Award winners for best actor and actress.

Name the last decade's worth of World Series winners.

At this point, Gafni would ask: "How did you do?" His point is this: "We forget yesterday's headliners. These people are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Trophies tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and awards are buried with their owners."

Here's another quiz, he says. See how you do on this one.

List a few teachers who aided your journey through school.

Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.

Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special.

Name half a dozen heroes whose stories have inspired you.

I am sure all of us did better on this second quiz than on the first. What made these people memorable for you? What, in turn, makes you memorable to others?

No one here is Alfred Nobel, yet you can learn just as much about a happy death from the lives of the ordinary people as you can from the lives of the famous. I confess that I like reading the obituaries of ordinary people in the newspaper; I read them not obsessively and sadly, as I have read obituaries in the last weeks, but with enjoyment because they have so much to teach about living a meaningful life.

There was a StarLedger write-up about woman who died about a month ago named Lois Menkes. She had started out life wanting to be in entertainment. Her hopes were dashed after an experience at a New York radio station that was asking for volunteers to perform children's fairy tales on the air. The station called and told her she had a part but they didn't tell her what the part was. She called all her family and friends and told them to tune into the broadcast. She got to Penn Station Newark at dawn and arrived at the radio station, ready for her big role.

It turns out she was a bird and her line was "Tweet Tweet." She realized that being in entertainment was not meant to be. She became a teacher who taught for 34 years at a Newark elementary school. She would take her students to New York museums on weekends, invite them to her home for barbecues, and play baseball with them in the local schoolyard. In lieu of flowers, the family asked for donations to the Project Pride scholarship fund that provides college aid, tutoring and recreation programs for Newark students.

Or what about Saul Schwartz, whom a recent obituary described as a man who had been very active in the Metrowest Jewish community and who had been one of the founders of the Jewish historical society of Metrowest. His own words were read aloud at his funeral. "I

hope you didn't come here to be sad," he had written: "Make it a celebration of a life spent in service to the Jewish people and people in general."

Or what about Marty Geltman, another New Jersey resident who, knowing of his impending death from cancer, held his funeral while he was alive in time to enjoy it. Mr. Geltman taught for 34 years at Springfield Elementary School and volunteered for the Mental Health Players of Montclair, Newark Academy and the Daughters of Israel Nursing Home in West Orange. Wearing a tuxedo and tennis shoes, sitting in a wheelchair, this dedicated teacher said, "I wanted to teach people how to die."

You may have read the story of Diane Golden Brosnahan, who recently died of cancer in Providence at age 38. When she was 12, she developed bone cancer in her right leg, which was amputated above the knee. She was back on the slopes 6 months later, on her way to becoming a disabled world champion many times over, an Olympic alpine gold medallist and a member of the Women's Sports Foundation hall of fame. She didn't want to be perceived as pitiable and brave for just being out there. She wanted admiration for her technique, her skill, for how she had discarded disabled ski equipment for regular ski poles to produce faster times and fought successfully to compete in the same races with the non-handicapped. For years she gave motivational speeches but could take only so much herself and tried once to commit suicide. Soon after, the athlete in her wished not just to survive but also to celebrate life. So she climbed Mt. Rainier.

From these people, you can learn an important lesson about achieving a happy death: Suffering doesn't have to prevent you from leading a meaningful life. Three of the four people I described died of cancer so they must have experienced pain. Yet somehow they managed not to let the pain become the predominant force in their lives. I didn't know any of these people personally; I just know that their obituaries were inspirational to me. I don't know what they would have done differently, what kinds of regrets they had, what would have made their deaths happier.

Even lives lived with meaning must have some regrets. When the humorist Erma Bombeck knew that she was dying, she wrote about what she would have done differently:

"I would have talked less and listened more.

"I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained or the sofa faded.

"I would have eaten the popcorn in the good living room and worried much less about the dirt when someone wanted to light a fire in the fireplace.

"I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble on about his youth.

"I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a beautiful summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

"I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.

"I would have sat on the lawn with my children and not worried about grass stains.

"I would have shared more of the responsibility carried by my husband.

"I would have gone to bed when I was sick instead of pretending the earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for the day.

"I would never have bought anything just because it was practical, wouldn't show soil, or was guaranteed to last a lifetime.

"Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy, I'd have cherished every moment and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was the only chance in life to assist God in a miracle.

"When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, Later Now go get washed up for dinner.

"There would have been more I love yous and more I'm sorrys, but mostly given another shot at life I would seize every minute look at it and really see it live it and never give it back."

"Look at it and really see it, love it and never give it back." If you don't take risks, Erma Bombeck is saying, you don't make mistakes; but if you don't make mistakes, you don't learn and grow and experience joy and have a truly happy life. And yet think how Erma Bombeck made us laugh despite her regrets about what she didn't do, despite the mistakes she made. She offers us a perfect example of how a meaningful life can be happy without being perfect.

I thought about this recently when Yankee pitcher Mike Mussina pitched an almost perfect game. The headlines said it all: Almost perfect. Even the opposition Boston fans were cheering him on by the end. He gave up no hits or walks until the last out in the bottom of the ninth. He threw a pitch that ended up falling into left field for a single. When the reporters asked him how he felt the next day, he said: "I'm going to be thinking about that last pitch for the rest of my life." I understood that comment as a measure of how deep his disappointment was in that moment; but apparently the moment stretched into the next day when he still refused to talk to reporters.

David Cone, the opposition pitcher that night who not long ago pitched a perfect game in a Yankee uniform said he hoped he would get a chance to talk to Mussina. What would he tell him? "Embrace what you've done," he said he would tell Mussina. "He shouldn't turn that great game into such a negative. He should look back on that game with a lot of pride. It might be the best game he's ever pitched."

I imagine there will come a day when Mussina no longer dwells on what might have been but can turn his focus instead to what might yet be. Maybe he will pitch that perfect game someday and maybe that last pitch will be the clincher this time; or maybe he will discover that pitching a perfect game was not the be all and end all of his life. Maybe he'll realize that you can still make it into the Baseball Hall of Fame without pitching a perfect game. Maybe he'll understand that it is more important to be a successful pitcher than a perfect one. Maybe he will learn to answer the Talmud's questions about living a meaningful life, a life in which you have learned and you have taught, you have lived with integrity and hope, you have considered the needs of others and have understood one thing from another.

While it is possible to pitch a perfect game, it isn't possible to live a perfect life. A Midrash tells us, "When Job complained about his misfortunes, the Holy One of Blessing showed him a sukkah with three walls." "A three-walled sukkah," according to Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, "is God's way of reminding Job that every person's sukkah has one wall missing. Sure everyone would like to have a four-walled sukkah, writes Greenberg, a happy marriage, gifted children, a successful career, good health and a long life.

In actual life, however, no one has a four-walled sukkah. Sorrow, failure, loss of health, and disappointment in varying degrees these are our common human lot. There is democracy in suffering – no one is exempt... Three walled sukkahs are the rule, not the exception. And yet a three-walled sukkah is kosher for use. Despite the missing wall, the sukkah continues to stand.

"Life is full of heartbreak but it is also full of ways of overcoming it. So God was saying to Job, stop thinking only of the pains you suffer, you also have pleasures to enjoy. Stop counting and recounting your losses and begin counting your blessings. Sure you have lost a wall of your sukkah but there are three walls remaining. Make the most of those three walls. You will be held accountable for what you do with those remaining walls."

During these days of repentance, we speak of being inscribed in the Book of Life. The Kabbalistic Master of Slonim said: It is not we who are asking God to inscribe us but God who is asking us, Please, this year, write yourself in the book of life. Live a life of meaning. Conduct your business faithfully. Set fixed times for Torah study. Participate in raising a new generation. Maintain hope for salvation. Try to understand one thing from another. Write yourself in the Book of Life so that when the time comes, you, too, might have a happy death.

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