

“The Chaplain is Here to Speak With You”

by Rabbi Tom Heyn, Kol Nidre Sermon 5772 / 2011

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“The chaplain is here to speak with you.” That kind of introduction doesn't usually get a rousing response. If anything, it signifies to those hearing it that something is terribly wrong.

I've been introduced in that way to many individuals and families, from nursing home hallways to hospital waiting rooms. I see people in all walks of life. Some are Jewish, but many more are not. Some are happy to see me, but some greet me tentatively, as if they're trying to hide from something or someone; like the stranger they sometimes imagine seeing behind me. I have talked to many family members, but I have also been there with patients when they received their terminal diagnosis, or when their families had to make decisions about 'withdrawal of care.' I was not far from many patients when they took their last breath. I was there, ready to embrace life but knowing that death, too, is a part of life.

Most people would rather not think about all this. They're healthy, thank God – well, for the most part. They find all sorts of ways to stay busy and engaged through constant stimulation and activity. Their obligations demand their complete attention so that they end up having no time left to think about these things.

We've fallen so deeply into this pattern of denial that a confrontation with our vulnerability seems like an inconvenience. It could be a major inconvenience, like a heart attack or a cancer diagnosis. Or, it could just be a minor inconvenience, like catching a cold and having to miss work, or being late for a meeting because a fatal accident was blocking traffic.

We have become so callous to these things, that this way of life, for most of us, seems “normal.” But, at some point in our lives, the cracks begin to show or the numbers just don't add up.

You might have been thinking that death should come as the summation of life's varied and wonderful experiences. The numbers add up, we hope, to a meaningful conclusion and then end neatly. Death is not supposed to intrude in the midst of the equations of our lives, disrupting our calculations, confusing our prepared solutions. But, too often – and I've seen it – the end is abrupt and life remains an unknown quality – a vexing and incalculable problem, made unsolvable by death.

On this eve of Yom Kippur, we are reminded that, in the face of death, we do not have all the answers and that coming to this realization can help us. And so we engage in rituals that, to most people,

seem dreadfully unpleasant. We abstain from food and drink, just like someone approaching death. We recite confessional prayers, just like the *vidui* that a traditionally-religious Jew will say, or have said, when dying. We wear white, reminding us of the simple shrouds in which traditionally-religious Jews are buried. We refrain from wearing leather, from bathing and sex as though we or a loved one were dying.

As we read the verse, “Who shall live and who shall die?” our prayers should take on the frenzied intensity of last chances. If we allow ourselves to enter into this sacred drama, this is our last chance. There is an utter finality to this occasion. “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.” Today may be the year our lives are not sealed in the “Book of Life.” Not a pleasant thought, but not nearly as bad as what I am about to describe:

I recently learned of an incident in the life of Russian author, Fyodor Dostoevsky. He was no friend to the Jews, but he had a story worth telling. In 1849, Fyodor was arrested when he was about 28 years old. It was for associating with a literary discussion group of progressive-minded thinkers who were strongly opposed to the monarchy. The group discussed flaws in Russia’s class system; they even talked about forming a secret society and starting a revolution.

Fyodor and several others in this group were arrested and imprisoned for eight months. For several of those months he began intensely reading the Bible and studying religious literature. Then he received his sentence which had been decided by the czar – death by firing squad. Together with his friends who were given the same sentence, he was brought to the Semenovskiy drill ground in St. Petersburg, known today as Pioneers’ Square, where the sentence was to be carried out. He did not know until the very last moment that the sentence had been changed – to four years in a labor camp.

The experience of believing his death was imminent, changed Dostoevsky forever. He later went on to write *Notes from the Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and many other classic novels and short stories. He made only an oblique reference to the experience in his novel *The Idiot*, which he wrote almost twenty years after the incident took place.

Two of Fyodor's friends went 'insane' from the psychological trauma they experienced. While the experience was just as traumatic for him, he had inadvertently prepared himself for it in his study of religious texts. As a result, the experience served to awaken in him the capacity to confront the truth of his own mortality. This close scrape with death gave Dostoevsky a radically new appreciation for life. I know the same can be seen in the work of many who wrote memoirs during and after the Holocaust, such as Anne Frank, Etty Hilesom, and Elie Wiesel.

Realizing how important this subject is, especially on this sacred eve of Yom Kippur, I felt it would be important for me to share something very personal with you.

I have been serving as your Rabbi, leading services, chanting from the Torah, running the Hebrew school, writing articles and making phone calls. But, as you probably know, I have another vocation as a hospice chaplain, helping people through transitions around death and dying. I've been visiting patients from Hanover and Lebanon down to, until recently, Worcester, MA. And often when I visit a patient or family, they know it's probably because we have something serious to talk about.

That is true for tonight, as well. And because of the subject matter, (putting on his hospice ID badge) I thought it would be better for me to speak to you as a hospice chaplain instead of just speaking to you as a rabbi. Since I have some experience with, and exposure to, people who are dying, I thought this would be an important conversation to have on the eve of Yom Kippur, a day for rehearsing our death.

So let's just say I have been called into service, to come speak with you. Let's just imagine that I was contacted by your parents, or a spouse or partner, or your grown children. Who is it in your life who might have called a chaplain to come speak with you? If no one comes to mind, it doesn't matter so much who's idea it was, except that it was probably someone who loves you very much.

So let's just say that they thought I should speak with you because I have some news about your condition, your diagnosis, your prognosis. It sounds almost funny to say but it's true: I'm here tonight to tell you that your condition is terminal. That means, as much as it's true for me and everyone else here, you should know that your condition is terminal. Now it could be as soon as tomorrow; we don't know. You may still have thirty days. You may have a year. There's even a chance you could have thirty years; we just don't know. And adding to that, the uncertainty of it all can be as distressing as anything. And so my recommendation is that we begin preparing. Right away. Tonight, even. That is, if you haven't yet thought about Yom Kippur quite in these terms, it's a good time to start.

Standing here as a chaplain, it looks to me like you're doing the right thing. I think you made a good choice in coming here tonight. Prayers for repentance and forgiveness and the themes connected with Yom Kippur are exactly what we all need. I don't think I could have come up with a better program or service, even if I were a rabbi. These readings and rituals are designed precisely with this purpose in mind. So, you've chosen well to come tonight, and you should know that it is deeply meaningful for me to engage in these rituals with you.

So before I go back to being the rabbi, I suppose I have two or three final thoughts I could share with you:

First of all, get your things in order. I don't really need to spend any time on this tonight because there are many other people who are much more experienced than I with that stuff. The financial and legal matters, issues around your estate, life insurance, your business and family – all these things need to be reconciled. There's a lot there that needs your attention, but that's not my area of expertise. Call an attorney, a financial planner, a therapist, whoever can help you. Maybe there's a project you wanted to finish up. Is there still something you wanted to communicate to your loved ones. Is there a legacy you wanted to leave behind? You need to take care of this stuff, sooner rather than later.

Now keep in mind that when a person believes or knows she is about to die, there are issues that come to the surface and it's common to make important decisions – quickly. You may be moved to promise something, to yourself or to a loved one, or even make a vow.

This is the reason why we began tonight's service with *Kol Nidre*. Not only is it a beautiful song, it is actually a legal formula which says that you might not be able to fulfill the vows you're likely to make tonight. So you'll be pardoned if some of your promises cannot be kept. No one will hold it against you because, when it comes down to it, it's really just between you and God. But if you should decide to make a large contribution to BAJC to help support its rabbi, we hope you'll make good on that pledge.

So, that's the first thing. Get your affairs in order.

The second thing is, we need to get clear on some terms. Now, as a chaplain, I often conduct what I call a “spiritual assessment.” It's not for testing anyone or judging them. It just helps me to know something about the patient's family of origin, their faith tradition of origin, and what they've come to believe or not believe. Most of all, I want to know what will be helpful to them in the process of making their transition. What “turning of the soul” might they need? And is there anything I can do to help facilitate that?

One thing I often do is have a conversation about the ideas and values that are important to a client, and those that are not. We usually find that some ways of thinking are helpful, and others are not. A few ideas that are helpful might be the belief in the existence of a soul or spirit. Ideas of heaven and hell may or may not be so helpful. But I like to explore these areas with patients, especially those who have thought about their own mortality. Do we go through some kind of transition or do we simply “live on” in the hearts and minds of our loved ones?

Having seriously considered the many answers to these questions, my experience tells me that there

are spiritual truths, and it's helpful for us to be clear about them. It's good to know if you're here for a reason and, if so, what that reason might be. It's good to know if there is such a thing as lasting peace and wholeness. It's good to know if you'll see your loved ones again. In a way, it's like putting your spiritual affairs in order. That's exactly what I am prepared to talk with you about tomorrow, as a rabbi.

The last thing I would say as a chaplain is this: When a rabbi says it's good to practice for and rehearse your own death, take it as good advice. It doesn't have to be as intense as the experience Dostoevsky went through, but fasting and praying on Yom Kippur is good preparation for that day when death is imminent. Rabbi Eliezer in the Talmud said basically the same thing: that you should do *teshuvah* the day before your death. And how do you know when that will be? That's precisely the point. And so we must start tonight.

So, in closing, put your practical affairs in order and, beginning tonight, your spiritual affairs. If what I have said makes sense so far, tomorrow it gets even better. Oh, and by the way, if a chaplain ever comes to speak with you again, be sure to welcome him or her as a friend and fellow traveler. Who knows, you might even find you've been talking to a part-time rabbi.