

YOM KIPPUR 5777

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My words today will have two beginnings, but lead to only one ending.

The first beginning

I discovered a very strange custom of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regarding the lessons taught to young girls in the northeast (at least) of this country. They were taught to sew, and used the embroidery sampler as a major form of expression of their skills. That, of course, is not the strange part. It is what they embroidered that surprised me. Here are some samples of the samplers. First one in prose:

Nothing is so sure as death and nothing is so uncertain as the time when I may be too old to live, but I can never be too young to die. I will live every hour as if I was to die the next.

Lydia Draper, age 13, 1742

But most of the samplers were in verse:

***Sickness may strip you of the bloom of the rose,
But beauties of the mind... endure beyond the grave.
My young friend, prepare to meet your God.***

Sukey Merrill, age 14, 1793

***How frail is life... like a fading flower
That flourishes and withers in an hour.
Now we're in health, but ere... day is fled,
We may be numbered with the silent dead.***

Hannah Sevey, age 13, 1818

***When I am dead and laid in my grave,
And all my flesh decay'd,
When you see this think on me,
A poor young harmless maid***

Rachel Anderson, age 10, 1803

***Death's terror is the mountain faith removes,
'Tis faith discovers destruction.
Believe and look with triumph on the tomb!***

Elizabeth Greenleaf, age 10, 1768

Should a ten year old have such ideas? And I have seen many others works in this vein, including the work of 8 and 9 year olds. What prompts a parent or teacher to require small children to contemplate their inevitable deaths?

Do not be quick to say that so many died young in those days. It is true, but not as true as you may think. In their biographies, most of these girls live full lives, some into their eighties and nineties.

When Joshua was a little boy, we were hesitant to show him classic Disney animations, as they all involved at least one truly horrible scene. But he saw them one way or another, and even far worse.

Consider: we may not ask kids to embroider poems about their deaths, but we certainly can barely shield them from the relentless violence and bloodshed of the news, TV shows and movies. Maybe this is our way of instilling the same lesson. A terrible lesson! To learn not only about death per se, but that I myself must one day die. How old must the child be to be taught this? Maybe younger than we think.

I remember very clearly when I grasped this hideous inevitability. I was seven. Exactly. I received a birthday card with a dollar inside. I looked upon Washington's face, we having learned about him recently in school. I knew he was dead. Then I realized, suddenly, and with immense horror, that just as he was dead, so will I be! My fear lasted nearly five decades. After that, not so much, but more on my Jobian acquiescence later.

The second beginning

Tree-of-Life is an amazingly full image in Judaism. It is a metaphor so profound that the very word metaphor is inadequate and even insultingly simplistic to express it.

First, there is the Tree-of-Life in the Garden of Eden story of Genesis chapters 2 and 3. It is described there as the source of eternal life. Yet God kicks us out of the garden before we can eat of it. Why?

Then there is the Tree-of-Life as Torah, such as found in the words we sing at the end of every Torah service:

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה...

"It is a Tree-of-Life to all who hold on to it..."

And then there is the Tree-of-Life as the Lurianic Kabbalistic image of the power of God that grows through all of existence.

Other religious civilizations have such tree images, such as the Bodhi Tree in Buddhist culture, sometimes called the Peepal Tree. In tales, it is the tree Guatama Siddartha sat under as he attained the enlightenment and became the Buddha.

Or Yggdrasill, the world tree of Norse culture, whose roots are established in the underworld, whose trunk grows through Midgard, and whose crown flourishes in Asgard.

There is a reason for this abundance of tree imagery, including its brilliant representation of the fractal boundary that divides and yet unites chaos and order. There are the visceral images of both the peace of a walk through the woods right alongside the terror of the dark and overwhelming forest.

Here is my tree meditation. Every existent thing, alive or not, is a leaf of the Tree-of-Life. (The Lurianic image is not so very different from that of Yggdrasill, surprisingly.) And every difference among things: whether a person, or a falcon, or a daisy, or a limestone cliff, or the crust of Jupiter's moon Europa, or the beacon of a quasar at the edge of the universe, whose light took thirteen billion years to arrive here... every difference among these very different things is like

the variety among leaves: the size of a specific leaf, its position on the tree, how vulnerable one leaf or another may be to disease, when it changes color and what color it changes to, how much chlorophyll within makes how much sugar... yet all leaves are on one tree, and all sharing the same life-giving sap.

But sap is not merely a thick liquid of nutrients flowing through the xylem and phloem of plants, it is an energy, a light, a fire. In Hebrew, it is שרף. The word means “burning” and it is from the same root as שרפים one of the species Tanakh teaches make up the heavenly host. The sixth chapter of Isaiah has a lot to say about them. How does sap burn and in what way is it akin to angels?

All is connected, every part influencing the whole and thus every other part. Existence is deeply interwoven on a level we do not see, unless nature or we ourselves wound them. Call it Quantum Entanglement, or, as Einstein put it, “spooky interaction at a distance...”

Our death is not only an end, it is also a part of everlasting; of eternity; of simply *what is*. A leaf has only a few months of life. When a leaf dies, it is soon forgotten, unless somebody picks it up and saves it, pressing it in a book or mounting it on cardboard. Yet even then, forgotten soon enough. As Rabindranath Tagore says “The butterfly counts not months, but moments, and has time enough.”

Yet every leaf brought something to the tree. It added its energy and sustenance to the whole. It has changed the tree itself. Even when the leaf turns and falls, fluttering to the ground, it *will always have* added to the tree. Notice that strange verbal construction. A mixed future and past tense. It *will always have*. That is the tense formulation that best embraces our lives.

*From the Source of Light pours forth the spark
That wanders worlds both pomp and stark,
Touching beast and dust and stone and tree,
And our human breast, dispelling its dark.*

*From death of stars the atoms outward fly,
And, here & there, in empty cosmic regions lie,
To spin & take new shape upon the Potter's wheel,
To live again as hearts & hands, as songs & sighs.*

*The source is God, who now & ever creates
Cosmos; with it, our world. Chaos awaits
Form, which Godly breath caressing turns from
Darkness into womb: and light abyss abates.*

*The blue-green life of seas the stuff of breath emits,
Thus life of orders higher than itself permits;
And we who live and die so offer to the world
More than our single life's accomplishment admits.*

Eternal does not mean forever, eternal means existing outside of temporality, the notion that time flows in a single direction. There is no past, present and future. In time, there is the future becoming the past. In eternity there is only presence.

God has ordained that existence is both a temporal and an eternal phenomenon. As temporal, we are born, we grow and live, we die. A few years under the sun. As eternal, we are, and being, bring something into the whole of existence that is as eternal as the whole. We are never born, we never die.

When I first considered these ideas in something like a fullness, decades ago, it was mainly an intellectual conceptualization for me, and it remained so for quite a while. At some point, temporally speaking, it ceased to be merely intellectual. I cannot tell when that was. Now it is like sap running through my veins. I do not worry about whether or not there is an afterlife. I know I am eternal and that is my quietus.

But we are not made to live in eternity for the most part. We are overwhelmingly temporal creatures. So much so, that the vast majority of persons do not even recognize when, from time to time, so to speak, temporality ceases and they stand in eternity. People do not recognize, for the most part, that there is no past, present and future structure. That when the anticipated, worried about future floods past us into the already happened, they stand in time. But when they are present, they stand in eternity.

As Martin Buber pointed out, using a different vocabulary, eternity has no words except the glittering “I - You,” and thus cannot be categorized, or comprehended. When we bring our rationality to bear, we stand in time again. And, as I said, do not, for the most part, usually even recognize that we had not been a creature of temporality; we, like the **שרפים**, like Adonai our God, have been eternal.

And thus we learn why God kicks us out of Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3. Because we are meant to be creatures who, although able to touch eternity and even dwell there a bit, are mainly intended to live through time, making as good a future as we can. That is how we aid God in the creation of a masterpiece: moment-by-moment, inch-by-inch, helping to generate an eternity of the greatest possible perfection. We obviously have much more to do within temporality. Eternity-wise, I have hope that it is indeed as perfect as this particular point on the time-line is imperfect.

So Yom Kippur presents quite a challenge. We must come to recognize ourselves both as eternal, but also as finite and ever-so-flawed beings of time. We must review the past and resolve ourselves for the future, even as we realize that there is no past and future.

Yet this is not really a contradiction. Our lives, as connected to every other existent, as part of the Tree-of-Life, affect that tree eternally. If our lives are sub-par, we have affected the Tree negatively. We have spoiled the Tree and soiled eternity.

We are so complacent, that we generally need a hard and swift kick in the butt to make any change at all in our lives. This is probably why so many ancient sages, not to mention pre-adolescent girls with needles and thread from a century ago, pull out our inevitable death and look at it face-to-face, in the hope that the grinning skull of our own future face shocks us out of complacency and into a life-affirming embrace of change for the better.

Note the looming presence of the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* during these days of Awe. “Who shall live and who shall die...” Every time we pray this prayer I wince in acknowledgment of the persons who prayed it with us last year, but are not with us this year, and I wonder, **חס וחלילה**, who among us this year will not be here to pray it next year. I very much include myself in this uncertainty. And as the number of people that I know who are dead increases, this wonder and wincing only increases each year.

When we consider the words of *Unetaneh Tokef*, we may glide upon their surface and see an old-fashioned theology of threat, an attempt at scare tactics: be good or else! And we may resent such a tactic, partly because we are moderns and not medievals, and partly because, despite being moderns, it still works.

But *Unetaneh Tokef* is not a scare tactic. It is only a simple and horrible observation of what really happens. There are many many ways to die, and nobody knows when some such way will end their own life or the lives of those they love.

Walt Whitman, from his "Song of Myself:"

***I depart as air, I shake my white locks
at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow
from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me
under your boot-soles...
...The smallest sprout shows that there is
really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life,
and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.
All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed,
and luckier.***

And Benjamin Franklin once quipped,

A long life may not be good enough, but a good life is long enough.

Or as Betsy Googins, age 9, sewing a sampler in 1808 put it:

***Behold o'er death's bewildering wave
The rainbow hope arise;
A bridge of glory o'er the grave
That bears beyond the sky.
Sure if one's blessing Heaven on man bestows
'Tis the pure peace that conscious virtue knows.***

When fully grasped, the confrontation with own's mortality, scary and terrible as it is, also comforts, because a hint of the lack of death's complete reality reminds us of our eternity.

If our lives are lived with righteousness, then we have blessed Eternity. What we do in our lives is not merely a series of actions, good and bad, but an unerasable component of all that ever exists. Thus our victory over our own pettiness is not merely a personal triumph, and not even merely a goodness for those around us. It is an eternal blessing that adds to the greatness of all existence. Poetically, it would be stronger to say "...all of existence that ever was and ever shall be..." except it hasn't so much been and will be, as simply *is*.

Says God, "I have set before you life and its blessing, death and its curse. Choose life."