

WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE YK 5770 DAY

If there is one prayer other than Kol Nidre that we resonate most with over RH and YK it is U'n'tasneh Tokef – The great Shofar is sounded.... who will live and who will die. Mee Yich'ye oo'mee yamut"

I always shudder when I hear of death during the first days of the New Year. You don't have to necessarily be Orthodox, 'Religious' Jews to have in this prayer the back of your minds,

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die, who shall suffer and who shall be tranquil..."

And then we read the kicker, so to speak, at the end of the prayer: "But repentance, prayer, and deeds of charity avert the severity of the decree." On one level this message is a good one; on another it presents a set of problems....

Imagine that someone in your family dies during the month of Tishri, right after the HHDs, or for that matter anytime in the year. It obviously happens; we have yahrzeits each day of the year. You ask, in your heart, if not of your rabbi, "Did our loved one do something to deserve the illness that she contracted, at the accident that occurred? Did she not pray enough, or give enough charity last year to avert the divine decree that he/she would die?" The question is a challenging, legitimate one, and one that is shared by many people.

One way I deal with this dilemma is through my own theology of understanding this prayer. In this prayer, you may remember, we confront the image of God watching as we mortals pass before Him, “kivenei maron.” This is usually translated as "a flock of sheep,"

but I translate the prayer a bit differently from most prayer books. I would translate the phrase as "As a general musters his troops, causing them to pass before his gaze." I base this interpretation on a commentary by Rashi which translates the words kivenei maron as a "troop of soldiers."

For me, that difference is very significant. If we are merely a flock of sheep, then we are herded willy-nilly from place to place, from year to year. Soldiers, however, know that when they go out to battle, some may be injured or may not return. So, too, as we go from year to year, we know that we can not expect everyone to gather again next year without some changes in personnel, and that even those who do return will have experienced significant changes in their lives.

The “prescription” of repentance, prayer, and deeds of charity may not prevent those changes from occurring, but they can help us deal with what happens to us and to our loved ones. Hopefully, the person who has died had a positive attitude toward life, and an ability to maintain it in spite of any possible illness, or until a sudden death -- an attitude conditioned by his/her love of God, and his/her desire to perform mitzvot, especially tzedakah. That is why a person is able to live well despite pain, and that is why such a person can be able to accept the “final decree” when it becomes fact.

So now I share this analysis with you. The theme, the point, of the prayers of this season is that actions make a difference. What we do matters! However, we should not picture God as a score keeper, tallying up our deeds, good and bad, and determining the year's winners and losers. Rather, we should think of God as compassionate, crying with those who are suffering, and offering comfort to them and their loved ones -- a comfort that can be made tangible by deeds of loving-kindness we can perform for others, and for ourselves, as well. And this is what we find also in our community, as I have talked about earlier on RH. This is what Rabbi Harold Kushner says about this prayer.....

But to change direction -- only a little, we all are aware that, over the past few months, the words "Who shall live and who shall die" have echoed in the American political discourse. The hottest political topic of this season is health care reform. Understandably, it has generated a lot of passion among proponents and opponents. And one of the proposed changes that have drawn significant attention involves end-of-life counseling. Some opponents of health-care reform have seized on this provision, and have said that this counseling will be tantamount to creating what they call "death panels." Signs outside town hall meetings have read, "Obama Lies; Grandma Dies." The people holding these signs fear that the divine choice of who shall live and who shall die will be taken from God and given to strangers or, even worse, bureaucrats.

Now, I want to be clear about this: in this sermon I am non-political. I am not advocating for or against any specific health care reform proposal. I respect your right to your opinions, regardless of whether you're in favor of

any proposed reform or are opposed to it, and I do not want to persuade you one way or the other on anything that may be debated in Washington. I have my opinions – but they are exactly that. However, I do want to address the topic of end-of-life counseling, and clear up some of the misconceptions which are currently being bandied about. Because if people do not address these crucial questions – whether for themselves or for their loved ones -- it will affect these discussions and also, now to share a feeling, potentially set the cause of responsible medical care back by decades.

I deal with this issue often, whenever I am called to counsel individuals or their families about the subject of end-of-life planning. Too often, I am asked to speak to people who have not dealt with this issue until very late in their own lives or that of a loved one. In my previous work as a Hospice chaplain this question was a basic one that I had to deal with often.

You possibly know that there is an ethics committee at the Hebrew Health Care Home here in Hartford, or in most hospitals; one of an ethics committee's tasks is to deal with cases where there is conflict within families about how to treat a resident in critical health care situations. Such a committee doesn't have coercive power. In fact, its role is to hear people's concerns and help them come to a conclusion they previously have been unable to reach. But often, individuals and families, when invited to come to a consultation, will express fears that they will be asked to "sign a death warrant" for their loved one. Nothing could be further from the truth. The concern of an Ethics Committee and of Hospice is that people should not suffer needlessly. And, in situations where an elderly person is nearing

the end of his or her life, we want that transition to be as free of pain and anxiety as possible. Again, this is what, parenthetically, Hospice is all about... and this year – you should know -- there are two hospice organizations in greater Hartford now opened this past year to work specifically with the Jewish community.

Let me share with you an illustrative story from another community. An elderly woman from Russia was admitted to the hospital. When she was still in control of her cognitive abilities, she was asked if she would sign a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) form. She initially said she didn't want to sign or to give up on any medical care to keep her alive. The woman, however, was quite frail, and her doctors had recommended not administering CPR in the event of a heart attack because CPR could result in pain and suffering due to broken ribs. The woman's children talked with me. They told the committee that while they respected their mother's wishes, they also feared that she didn't understand the implications of her choice. A few days later, the family brought her to meet with me. I explained to the woman (through her children's translation) that her desire to live was admirable, but that if she elected to receive CPR, it could result in significant pain and suffering. I asked her to consider if she wanted to live with such pain. She thought for a few minutes, and then said, "I will now leave everything in the hands of God," and agreed to sign the DNR form. When she did, she had peace of mind and was able to enjoy the remaining days of her life in comfort and without worry, and with her family nearby. Sometimes just talking, listening, accepting, and reassuring can significantly help with a situation.

Many of us as Jews are under the impression that, when we near the end of life, we have no options. We may believe that Judaism insists that all measures must be taken to preserve life, even if it entails added suffering. This is NOT CORRECT. There are many eminent Orthodox rabbis, poskim, rabbis who answer questions about Jewish law. Just to cite one, Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz of Baltimore, has written and stated publicly that while Jews are obligated to preserve life, we are also obligated to prevent suffering. Far from having an absolute position, Judaism gives us significant leeway to make advance decisions about whether to apply or withhold life-saving measures to those who are dying.

To make it even clearer, every organized movement in Judaism, from Orthodox to Reform, has published samples of advance directives. Rabbis of all beliefs and practices are urging their members to engage in advance planning for themselves to avoid confusion and uncertainty when they are no longer able to express their wishes. And, if necessary, they encourage people to get end-of-life counseling from a qualified physician and legal advice from a qualified lawyer. Iris and I both have our living wills current in Connecticut.

These questions of medical life and death – and how they can affect families -- were dramatized in a movie that Iris and I saw last summer. It seems that I have a tradition of at least one movie citation each High Holy Day season; I guess this year I've waited until the final sermon! Talking about a movie in a sermon over Sukkot just wouldn't be the same! :)

Most of us know that so many of this end-stage, DNR, choices is created by cancer. Cancer is everywhere. By the time you reach middle age, cancer is bound to be part of your life or the life of someone you love. There are an estimated 12 million people alive in the U.S. who is dealing with some form of cancer. So when a mainstream movie comes along that depicts people dealing with it and the ethical questions it raises, it's worth commenting on.....

So how many of you saw the movie, "My Sister's Keeper" this past summer? I feel that it navigates a minefield of emotional explosives intelligently and sensitively, with excellent performances that strike the right balance between heartfelt and kleenex-holding and hand-wringing. It's an adaptation of Jodi Picoult's successful novel, though those who have read the book will recognize several changes.

The cancer victim at the center of the film is Kate, a girl now in her teenage years, who has leukemia. Some genetic engineering allowed her parents to give birth years before to a younger sister Anna, who grows up donating blood, stem cells, bone marrow, and whatever else is needed to keep her big sister alive. When Kate needs a kidney, 11-year-old Anna decides she's had enough, takes her life savings, and hires a hotshot attorney to sue for medical emancipation.

It is a plotline of an intriguing moral dilemma and a fierce courtroom drama, but the movie is equally about each family member's different way of coping with the crisis. The film takes an extremely delicate topic and treats it, and its audience, with respect. Watch it and you will sense the life-and

death drama that is being played out, as part of the human condition, in so many families today.

Let me return to the image which I used earlier, that of God acting like a commanding officer reviewing the troops. Unlike the caricature of movies and comic strips, I believe a real army general will be moved, perhaps even to tears, by the sight of his or her troops marching out to an uncertain fate. So, too, I believe God may act as the heavenly Judge and Jury, but is equally moved by the uncertainties and human condition life-events which all of us will confront in the year ahead.

As we stand before God on this Holiest of Days, let us maintain our faith that God cares for us and about what happens to us. Let us be open to God's caring presence, and make God's compassion an impetus for our own compassion to those with whom we live, work, and love. Yes, we pray for a good year and that we are written and sealed in God's Book of Life. But whatever may come, let us be strengthened in our resolve to do God's work by performing deeds of loving kindness, **and thus make this year a sweet one both for our world and for all whom we hold dear. AMEN.**
(Repeat)