

Two weeks ago, when we formally began the High Holiday season with Selichot, I had the attendees change the mantles and the table covering to the white ones we use during the Penitential Season. The white on the torahs, on the bimah table, in the kittels some of us opt to wear during these weeks symbolize two things. First they are the spiritual reminders of our quest for purity: That we rededicate ourselves at this season to purity in speech and in deed. In ancient time Yom Kippur was all about purifying the Temple before the “big holiday” of Sukkot. Today, we sit here for hours purifying our minds and souls – to reconnect with our loved ones and with God. The second meaning of white is also found in keynote prayers throughout our worship – it is the theme of our mortality. Some day, hopefully not soon, we are all going to die. And if we have a traditional funeral – this is what will be dressed in: simple, dignified, inexpensive, egalitarian. It’s not something we often like to think about – but living our lives fully before our death is what the High Holidays are all about. So I have three short stories – three different perspectives for us as we focus on the meaning of our lives in the face of our inevitable death.

First, from Rabbi Irwin Kula: I summarize: Sam Goldenhersch was my first rebbe of death. Sam was a gruff, hard-nosed building contractor in his 60s. He was no lover of rabbis, rebuking anything spiritual. But he was a friend whose challenging, confrontational personality kept me on my toes. It was painful to watch his diabetes slowly kill him. Over the years he lost one limb after another through amputation. He would not give up – no matter how much it hurt.

As a spiritual leader I knew better than Sam: If he would just stop fighting and let go: he would be much happier. But each Friday as I visited and asked how he was doing, he’d answer with some variation of: “How would you be doing if they took you apart limb by limb?” Another time as I got ready to leave he said: “leaving so soon?! Did you every notice how you conveniently visit when you have to be home in time for Shabbat?” I joked: you’re so tough you don’t need Shabbat. He laughed and said: That may be, but I smell fear. I think you are more afraid of what is going on with me than I am, which means you’re pretty scared... Why don’t you sit down.” Later, every time another part of his body would be amputated he would urge me to look at the stump; and then in what seemed to be a strange mix of courage, disgust, pride and resistance, he’d challenge me to touch the area. I didn’t conquer my fears, but I learned to dwell in them. Part of life.

About two weeks before he died, I went to visit Sam. The room had that acrid smell when death is close. Sam was barely conscious. A few months before I would have mumbled a prayer and said something comforting to his wife. That day I stood by his bed and then found myself learning over, planting a big kiss on his mouth. His wife started laughing and said: “Irwin, if Sam knew you’d kissed him on the mouth, he’d die.” Then we both began to cry.

There is great courage in letting go and there is great courage in fighting. There are many stages that people go through in the process of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, despair, and acceptance.

But they are not linear or clean. Our feelings about death change and evolve. Coping with death is really the ultimate humility practice and that is what we are rehearsing today. That's why I'm wearing a kittel. Yom Kippur is in part a way to enact our own death in order to imbue our lives with meaning. I certainly pray that no one passes away today or tomorrow. But I do hope that we'll rededicate ourselves through the rest of this day and throughout this year to living every moment we have fully on our own loving terms – sharing our unique spirituality with those we love.

2nd Story

It was anguishing a few weeks ago watching the news from Utah and the mine disaster occurring in Huntington. Miners trapped without communication equipment, rescuers killed in that attempt to save those who may never be found. Horrible. And then my thoughts though went back several years to the coalminers in Pennsylvania who endured a heart-rending rendition of life and death. Do you remember it? It happened in the Quecreek Mine in Somerset County when death by water seemed imminent.

It started when 60 million gallons of water came rushing through a ruptured wall. With the onslaught of water coming on, the miners knew that they had only seconds to live. One miner, Dennis Hall, picked up a below-ground phone just moments after the accident to warn a second crew of nine men to get out because water was filling the crippled shaft. After 80 hours of fear being trapped deep below the earth's surface all those nine men did make it, but according to their accounts they would be dead if even another minute had passed before Hall's warning.

What did it take for those men to be that selfless, to value the lives of others while in mortal fear of losing their own?

The men who did survive told how they craned their necks at one point to keep their noses above the frigid water. Wearing their heavy miners gear they attempted to swim through flooding, off shooting mine shafts in search of a possible escape route. They told how one miner, Mark Popernack made a fateful drill hole into the neighboring shaft and was stranded alone in the dark for three hours before several men risked their lives to search for him and return him to the group.

While all the miners were trapped they spoke of how they had wished they had said or done certain things in their life. One miner, Harry Mayhue said that when they were trapped, his first thought was that he hadn't kissed his wife goodbye that morning. As the waters rose around them, he asked his boss for a pen to write a note to his wife and children telling them he loved them. They all wrote notes on cardboard, never knowing if anyone was ever going to see them. They inscribed and sealed their notes in a water proof container that was tied to the group. At the time of these heartfelt expressions, they had no idea of their fate, whether they would live or die. And if they were to die, would it be from drowning in the freezing, rising water or from hunger or thirst, or strangulation from the lack of oxygen or by the stones of a cave in.

I don't believe I am stretching the point to say these men understood the power of our Yom Kippur, without knowing anything about Judaism. Our lives (and theirs) perpetually hang in the balance. We hope that true "Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Righteousness, will avert the severity of the decree." We take an active role in inscribing and sealing our own fates in the metaphoric Book of Life along with God on this Fast Day. Make sure to express not tomorrow but today the love and kindness you feel in your heart.

I hope I never have to risk my life to save another's, but the willingness to give of ourselves to others, to sacrifice for another soul's wellbeing – is central to the love we find and give in our souls. The miners also teach us: There is something within, I believe, an eternal truth that assures us, even in the face of death, that we are all somehow connected, part of something greater and far more lasting than our own earthly existence.

Third story

A final one this year from Rabbi Irwin Kula: It was four weeks before my niece Melissa's wedding. But then three weeks before the ceremony, my father-in-law Jules was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He is our precious grandpa. We're all incredibly close to him. My wife accompanied her parents to every appointment. My wife and I prayed that somehow he'd make it to the wedding of his precious granddaughter.

Although all the cancer could not be surgically removed, he came through – but until 2 days before the wedding we weren't sure if he'd be strong enough to attend. But he did come.

What happened over that weekend forever changed my understanding of simcha. The wedding was breathtaking. The night sparkled, the flowers were beautiful, the guests looked fabulous and the bride and groom were exuberant and gracious. Every moment, every detail was enriched by Jules's presence. Pale and thin under his tux, he beamed nevertheless.

When I looked over and saw him dancing with my wife, tears streamed down my face. When I circled closer I could Dana was also crying and yet both their faces were lit up with the biggest smiles I'd ever seen. I had watched them dance many times but this time there was a shimmering light around them. It was a different kind of dancing – sadness and happiness intertwined in every step and no one wanted the music to stop. We had taken sadness by the hand and somehow transformed it into joy.

There was nothing any of us wouldn't have done to take back the last month, to have Jules's health restored and yet the joy we felt during those two days was so life-affirming. There was a depth of gratitude, an appreciation for every detail, and a feeling of preciousness. The sorrow that overwhelmed and consumed us – somehow generated a more profound happiness, a feeling of being in the pulse and intensity of life. There is no happiness without sadness, there is no pleasure

without pain, no fullness without loss. They all go together. Naturally, we always want to get rid of the sadness rather than see how it works with the joy.

The lesson of that weekend was that joy is deepened by sadness and that joy can carry through that very sadness. Happiness is about embracing the cycle of life, about seeing everything in its widest context and experiencing it to the fullest. If we're only happy when everything is good, happiness will always elude us – and our lives will be narrowed. Pain and loss, inspiration and joy are intertwined part of our lives.

In a few moments will begin Yizkor. But throughout this day in symbol and often in words, we have been enacting our deaths in order to imbue our lives with meaning. Parts of our selves physically and spiritually are destroyed and created constantly. People we know and love die and we are left alone to contemplate what life will be without them.

It's not an accident that one of the best selling books ever is Mitch Albom's "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." It's not a great book but it teaches something powerful and of ultimate significance. No one gets an ultimate happy ending – during life we can't make everything right and someday we're going to die. But the story affirms that even the most painful events have a meaning we never could have understood at the time. We can have heaven right here. Heaven is those moments when we can hold it together, even when it's almost too much to bear.

A second century Jewish mystic said: "Repent one day before you die." How can we be ready? It all depends on how we are living right here, right now, in this very moment. Almost every day we have opportunities to embrace life more fully, to free ourselves from pretense, to do the right things for the right reasons. But we put things off because we think we still have time.

What ever you think about death, the ultimate test is, does it help you harness death in the service of life? Yom Kippur is about living with such care and passion that we redeem death from the absurdity which death imposes. When we think in these terms the questions are less about death than about what kind of person we want to be so that we can be fully alive. Kayn Yehi Ratzon – may God help us live fully this year.