

My mother never went to the doctor. I always assumed it was because she was afraid of death. What she did not know, she believed, couldn't hurt her. As it turns out, what my mother did not know is that she had colon cancer. Because she never went to the doctor, my mother's colon cancer went undetected until the tumor grew so large that it began affecting her health. By the time my mother received her cancer diagnosis, she was seriously ill. Her doctors told her that major surgery gave her the best chance to prolong her life. Sadly, my mother's weakened body barely survived the surgery. She died in recovery on May 22nd of this year.

I spent the days following her death being very angry at my mother for letting her fear of death prevent her from taking proper care of herself. I was convinced that my mother's fear of death was, in fact, the ultimate cause of her death.

However, when the day of the funeral arrived, I began to look at things a little differently. My mother had asked to be buried in the first Jewish "Green" cemetery in San Francisco, Gan Yarok—which means "green garden." Gan Yarok advertises itself as an environmentally conscious green cemetery. All graves are hand-dug; no liners are allowed. Caskets are optional, but, if used, must be biodegradable. Markers, if chosen, must be natural boulders and engraved simply. Rather than manicured lawns and plantings, landscaping in Gan Yarok is allowed to follow the natural cycles of the seasons and native California plants are encouraged.

It was the perfect choice for my mother. She was an organic gardner who maintained a large compost pile where all of our food waste was dumped and allowed to turn into fertilizer. My mother very much wanted her body to be a part of the organic process of replenishing the soil and helping to bring forth new life. For this reason, we chose not use a casket. My mother was simply buried in a shroud.

Watching my mother's body being lowered into the grave, it occurred to me that maybe she was not afraid of death at all. On the contrary, my mother seemed to have embraced death as a natural process that would re-connect her to the environment she so loved and protected. Her approach to life and death, then, was an organic one, letting natural processes take hold and not trying to hold herself apart from the world that she was a part of. If my mom was afraid of anything, it was not death, but getting sick and having to live her last years in a diminished state. Having spent the last couple of years caring for my father as his dementia has gotten worse may only have reinforced

this feeling for her. Avoiding doctors, as it turned out, may have spared my mother years of discomfort and painful treatments which, though they might have prolonged her life, would have deprived her of the quality of life that was so important to her. I would not have made the same decision, but I could now understand why she did. My mother was not afraid of death; only of not being able to live life the way she wanted to.

Unlike my mother, most of us do fear death--and for good reason. Why do we fear death? We know death can be painful, in some cases involving months and even years of suffering during which we lose the self we have always known. Despite our beliefs about the afterlife, death also evokes our fears of the unknown: of ceasing to exist altogether or of leaving those we love behind. When we think about the possibility of those we love dying, we may fear the very raw emotions that accompany grief. We don't want to feel the pain, the loneliness, the regret that inevitably accompanies the death of someone close to us. Objectively, there are many difficult and painful aspects to death, whether it is our own death or the death of people we are close to. No one of sound mind and body looks forward to death. That's why, from the beginning of our history, we have dreamed of the possibility of living forever. That's also why death is still very much a taboo subject and the experience of attending funerals and making shiva calls makes so many of us profoundly uncomfortable. It's also why so many of us will flee the sanctuary in a few minutes before Yizkor starts. Even though there are Yizkor prayers we can say for relatives, friends and Jewish martyrs, many of us have instructed since childhood that, if both our parents are still living, remaining in the sanctuary for Yizkor is an invitation to the *ayin hara*, the evil eye.

On Yom Kippur, though, the idea of death—and its connection to life—comes up again and again; a motif repeated throughout the entire day's prayers and rituals. In each Amidah, and in Aveinu Malkayenu, we ask God to inscribe us in the book of Life. In *Unetaneh Tokef*, we are confronted with the reality that the power of life and death are in the hands of God. It is God who decides “who shall live and who shall die” during the coming year. We recite Yizkor prayers to remember our loved ones who have died, and *Eleh Ezkera* to remember the martyrs of our people. We dress, according to our tradition, in garments reminiscent of the white shroud. We do not eat, drink, bathe or have sexual relations. It is as if Yom Kippur asks us not only to acknowledge the defining role of death in our experience and in our history, but also to confront the inevitability of our own death. On Yom Kippur,

we are challenged to overcome our fear of death; to stop avoiding the subject or pushing it to the farthest corners of our consciousness. Instead, we are pushed to confront the reality that all of us die, that our time is limited. We cannot afford to put off doing what we need to do to change our lives for the better. On Yom Kippur, we come face to face with the most important, existential questions. “How can we best live our lives? What is really important? How can we make the changes we need to make now, so we won't regret the missed opportunity later?”

Unfortunately, for many of us, the courage we gain on Yom Kippur ebbs away with the final blast of the shofar. But what would happen if, this year, we were able to overcome our fear of death not just for one day, but every day? What if we lived with a greater awareness that death is, indeed a natural part of life? What if we allowed the inevitability of death to inform the choices we make about the way we live and the things we value?

I believe that if we feared death less, both death and life would become more meaningful, more fulfilling experiences. In particular, if we embraced death as a natural part of life, we would certainly have better deaths. If nothing else, we would plan and prepare for our eventual departure, instead of leaving the planning to others in the chaotic moments after we pass on. Of course, there are people who do make their own funeral preparations. But, in my experience, those who prepare for their own deaths are in the minority. Those who do make the preparations are able to die with greater peace of mind of knowing that they took care of this responsibility and did not leave any unfinished business. They also die having ensured that there will be no wrangling among family members about the funeral arrangements. Given all the emotional upheaval that accompanies funerals, one of the greatest acts of love and kindness we can do for our loved ones is to make our arrangements in advance.

It is also possible that if we feared death less, we would be more comfortable with the Jewish traditions surrounding the funeral, which guide us to make the preparations simple and modest. In a traditional Jewish funeral, the deceased is dressed in a plain white shroud and a white cap. The shroud has no pockets, as a reminder that we can take nothing material with us to the next world. We use a simple casket that contains no metal; so that we can more easily promote the body's return to the earth. Again, we believe that the body is a holy vessel, a container for the soul. While the soul ascends to the world to come, the body should return to the earth, from which it came. The funeral service is

designed to help us to perform the mitzvah of returning this holy vessel to the earth with as much dignity as possible, much as we bury a Torah scroll or other holy book. At the same time, we acknowledge the departure of the immortal soul and pray for its well-being in the world to come. With this mindset, we might be less likely to focus on more elaborate arrangements for the funeral; more durable caskets or formal outfits that seem to subtly suggest that death is not the beginning of a natural process of return. The funeral service itself might then become even more helpful for us in our grieving process; encouraging us to focus more on coming to terms with the loss of loved one and celebrating the life they lived and less on externals that downplay the reality of death.

Even more important, if we embraced the inevitability of death head-on, we would also create health directives and durable powers of attorney. Doing so would mean that if we become incapacitated prior to death, our wishes regarding treatment will be known to our families. We would ensure that our families will not have to struggle with difficult decisions about life support, hospice and end of life care when they themselves are emotionally fragile. I have worked with countless families over the years as they try to care for a loved one at the end of life. These days, death is often a long, drawn out process. These situations are never easy. But it is much easier for a family to manage in these difficult circumstances when a loved one has given clear directives for the end of his or her life.

In addition, if we are spiritually and emotionally prepared for the inevitability of our death, we may be blessed with time before our death to have closure with our loved ones, to say the things we really want to say and have the experiences we really want to share. I have been privileged to know a number of people whose deaths I would describe as meaningful and beautiful. These people were able to accept what was happening to them and were fortunate enough to have the capacity to choose how to live out their last weeks and days in a way that brought them closure and peace. It takes tremendous courage and wisdom, and a bit of luck, to be able to manage one's death well. But a truly "mindful" death—one that makes the most of the painful situation—is one the greatest gifts we can give to our survivors and ourselves.

If we did not fear death so much, we might also be more comfortable teaching our children about death when they are young. When I was growing up, it was a given that children did not attend funerals. I was in third grade when my grandfather Ben died. I remember being left in my cousin's

house in Chicago in the care of a babysitter while my parents went to the funeral. I remember being very upset that I was left behind. I was close to my grandfather and he died very unexpectedly. I did not want to be left out of the service. I probably sensed that I needed some way to process my own grief, instead of just pushing it down with distraction.

Like most parents in those days, my mother and father wanted to shield me from the pain of grieving and from the realities of death. They thought, I am sure, that I would be scared and unable to handle the intensity of the experience. These days, we know differently. Children need to grieve too. And just as a funeral can be helpful for us to gain closure and process our emotions, so too, funerals can be helpful for children even as young as four or five. Of course, we need to prepare our children in advance for the experience, and reassure them that they will have our support and the support of other family members and friends at the service. But when we do, our children may well benefit from the chance to be a part of the grieving process. We worried about the impact of bringing the four year old Yoni to his Zayde Marv's funeral. But seeing Yoni participate so appropriately at my mother's funeral three years later confirmed that we made the right decision for our child. He was not afraid or overwhelmed with what was happening; he was comfortable expressing his feelings and reassured by knowing he was helping us to perform an important mitzvah.

Finally, if we feared death less, and embraced it more as a natural part of our life, we might be able to better respond to challenge we are issued each Yom Kippur: the challenge to to live each day fully and wisely and to keep our priorities straight. We would better be able to savor each stage of our lives as we live it; instead of always rushing forward in anticipation of something better. We might be less willing to waste our valuable time on petty jealousies and disagreements. We might not put off the chance to travel and enjoy new experiences. We might tell the people we love how we really feel more often, and get less bogged down in the annoyances and failings that distance us from them. We might put less stock in the things we can accumulate and more stock in the relationships that give our lives meaning and depth. We might even be more concerned with how we will leave the world for our children, and what we can do to protect our environment, alleviate suffering and promote peace and understanding. Above all, if we did not fear death, we might be able to handle the ups and downs of our lives with greater equanimity, knowing that there is only so much we can control.

We sometimes hear stories about people who have had “near death” experiences. There are

probably a few of us here today who have had such close calls. In many of these stories, the “near death” experience becomes a catalyst for personal transformation. Having suffered such a close call, the hero of the story becomes a better, saner, kinder person who savors the gift of life he or she once took for granted. In many ways, Yom Kippur is meant to serve as a kind of “near death” experience for each of us—minus the drama, of course. By confronting us with the reality that we will all die, and that our death could come at any time, Yom Kippur also seeks to become a catalyst for personal transformation. By pushing us to embrace the inevitability of our death, Yom Kippur also challenges us to embrace life in all its fullness. Our prayers to be inscribed in the Book of Life become all the more poignant because we understand the preciousness of our lives. We know we will not live forever; we may not even live beyond tomorrow. So we want to savor every moment of life God blesses us with. We want to treasure the warm feeling we get when sun shines on our faces. We want to cherish the laughter we share with a friend. We want to hold on just a little longer to our children and grandchildren before they run off and play. We want to make sure we enjoy all the blessings we can for as long as God allows us to be inscribed in the Book of Life. Having overcome our fear of death, we can now more fully celebrate the joy of living.

May all of us be inscribed and sealed for the coming year *b'sefer chayim tovim*—not just in the Book of Life, but in the Book of a Life Well-Lived; a life free from the fear of death, and lived in all its fullness.