

Rabbi Daniel Berman
Yom Kippur Yizkor 2022

Last week, the day after Rosh Hashanah, I received a call from the family of Aron Greenfield. Aron survived nine concentration camps during World War Two. His parents and seven of his eight siblings were killed. After liberation, he spent the next *eighty years* of his life dedicated to teaching about the experience of the Shoah. Eighty years. Thousands of people heard him testify to unimaginable horror, resilience and hope.

Aron lived here, in the Boston area. He spoke at Reyim for *Yom Ha'Shoah* three years ago. On Rosh Hashanah last week, visiting his family in Washington D.C. for the holiday, he fell asleep in the afternoon, and died.

Through a family connection, Aron's daughter reached out to me, and a few days ago we buried him on a beautiful day, with family and friends accompanying him to his place of shalom.

After the burial, as I left the cemetery, I saw I had a text from an old friend of mine.

"This morning we had a baby girl."

"Wow, mazal tov," I quickly texted back. "Send a picture, I can't wait to talk."

There are very few poems whose words I have ready to go as I need them, but that afternoon I thought of the poem "*Adam B'chayav, A Man in His Life*," by Yehuda Amichai, the great Israeli poet.

אדם בְּחַיּוֹ אֵין לוֹ זְמַן שְׂיִהְיֶה לוֹ זְמַן לְכָל

A man doesn't have time in his life to have time for everything.

He needs to love and to hate at the same moment,

to laugh and cry with the same eyes,

with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,

to make love in war and war in love.

And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,

to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest

what history

takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.

When he loses he seeks, when he finds

he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves

he begins to forget.

As I came home, I added to Amichai: "to bury and to welcome."

I thought of the shared work of those who tend to the dead and to the newly born; the *chevra kadisha*, who places their hands on the person's head to tuck them into the next world, and the nurse who takes the head of the baby and helps pull the child into this one. I wondered how many heads are being held by shepherding hands in any one moment.

There is a rabbinic tradition that when a baby is in the womb of its mother, angels descend from the heavens above and teach the baby the entire Torah. All of Torah is whispered, letter by letter, verse by verse, into the baby's ear. For the entirety of pregnancy, these whisperings of Torah are absorbed by the baby, where they settle and await to emerge into the world as she is born. At the exact moment of birth, however, an angel comes and strikes the baby on the mouth, causing her to forget the entire Torah, and all of its potential, hidden meanings. The teaching inspired a tradition, practiced in many communities dating back to Medieval times, of having a special Shabbat meal called *Seudat Zachor*, a meal of memory, on the first Friday night of a newborn's life. The name echoes the meal of condolence that mourners eat when they first return from a funeral.

Having been struck on the mouth and therefore lost access to the depths of Torah that was whispered into her soul, the newborn child is seen as a mourner. The loss is the loss of memory. She cannot remember what she once so intimately knew.

But then the work of a Jewish life begins - a life-long process of discovery of Torah. So that every new encounter with Torah is actually only the unveiling of a memory of what was once whispered

in her ear. It's all fluid. In Jewish thought, there are no ends and beginnings. Vitality moves through us, connecting all those before us to all those are yet to come. We do not own anything in the world. We are just passing through.

The Jewish novelist Dara Horn writes about the shared world among those who have died and those not-yet-born is the subject of the book The World To Come.

To describe what happens when someone dies, she uses the metaphor of the birth of twins. She writes, "when twins are in the womb and one of them is born . . . the twin who remains behind watches his sole companion vanish and suffers an agony almost too devastating to bear. Only a moment later, he will understand that his twin has not died, but quite the opposite, that his vanished friend is closer to him than he can know. This . . . is also the way of real death and the world to come. Just because we think people have disappeared doesn't mean they have. They are closer than we think." (p. 103)

In her book, the world to come is where new souls are made. People who have died come together to make people in their families who haven't been born yet. They pick out the traits they want the new people to have – they give them all the raw material of their souls, like their talents and their minds and their potential.

In one dramatic moment, we meet two characters named Daniel – a grandfather who has already lived and died, and his grandson Daniel, who had been conceived but not yet born.

Just before Daniel is born, his grandfather, in despair that his grandson would one day have to die, begins encouraging him to eat a fruit of the tree of life and therefore, once he is born, he will live forever.

At the moment that the not-yet-born Daniel is about to eat the fruit already dripping juices in his hand, his grandmother Rosalie sees him and screams:

“Daniel! Don’t you remember, you’re supposed to be born tonight.”

Rosalie then turns to her husband: “What was the point of this? You actually, genuinely, want him to be born and never die?”

“Why not, Rosalie? Why can’t he have what we didn’t have? Why should his children have to watch him die? Why should –“

“Because,” Rosalie answered, “that’s what makes it matter.”

In his anthology of Hasidic teachings, the philosopher Martin Buber includes the teaching of Rabbi Yitzchak from the town of Vorku, Poland. There is a verse in the book of Psalms that we chant and sing during our Hallel service on holidays and the first day of each new month. The verse says, “*lo amut ki echeyeh*” “I shall not die, but live.” Commenting on the verse, Rabbi Yitzchak teaches that in order to really live, one must confront one’s death. This is what we were doing on Yom Kippur. This is what it means to stand on the edge. But when he has done so, he discovers he is not to die, but to live.

Becoming mindful of our deaths will help us live. In the Talmudic tractate of Shabbat, we find the story of Rabbi Eliezar and his students. During a daily lesson, Rabbi Eliezar teaches them about repentance. "Repent one day before your death," he tells them. His students are confused. "But Rabbi, does a person know which day he will die?" Rabbi Eliezar responded: "Certainly then a person should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow he will die - so that in all his days he is repenting." (Talmud Shabbat 153a). "Whoever wants to live, must make himself dead." (Talmud Tamid 32a).

Learn how to die, and you will learn how to live. When we see our lives through the prism of how short and sweet they are, we act differently, with a calmer and more holistic frame of mind.

Relationships with people come forward. Things fall back.

The Yizkor service brings us into this meeting point of life and death. It is not a single point. It is fluid, always moving between us, those we have lost, and those yet to become.

My most favorite image of this kind of fluidity is from a parable written by an American Jewish soldier who died in the Israeli War of Independence.

"I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails in the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch her until at length she is a ribbon of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other. Then someone at my side says, "There, she's gone!" Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side, and just as able to

bear her load of living freight to the place of destination. Her diminished size is in me, not in her, and just at the moment when someone at my side says, "There! She's gone!" there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "There! She comes!" That is dying.¹

Before we begin the memorial prayers, take this time to remember those you have lost.

What did they look like?

How did they laugh?

What was the tone of their voice?

In the year to come, we will continue to find ways to remember their lives. *Lo b'shamayim hem* - they are not far away. They are still with you.

We recall all those family and friends who have died this past year.

We remember:

Adam Housman son of Rich and Nancy Housman

Sidney Karlin, father of Maureen Eskinazi

Suzanne Oesterreicher daughter-in-law of Rita Freudberg

Adele Levenson mother of Dawna Levenson

Rosalind Shaffer mother of Karen Shaffer

Seymour Friedman husband of Louise Friedman

Murray Tuchman father of Miriam Tuchman

¹ (Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning, p. 313)

Ziva Paley wife of Jack Paley and mother of Shimrit Markette

Edward Nierman

Myron Greenside

Beverly Miller mother of Jeff Miller

Robert Radding brother of Alan Radding

Ruth Brown Camerato wife of Al Camerato

Mayer Cavalier father of Candace Cavalier

Howard Gooen father of Judy Gooen

Lillian Frances Kane grandmother of Myla Green

And our teacher and friend Aron Greenfield.

May their memories inspire us and be sources of strength and blessing and we find healing and comfort as we remember them.

V'nomar, and let us say, Amen.