TREE OF KNOWLEDGE
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Parashat B'resheit
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One Yom Kippur the rabbi was warning his congregation about the fragility of life. "One day everyone in this congregation is going to die," he thundered from the bima.

Seated in the front row was a little old Jewish Grandmother who laughed out loud, when she heard this.

Irritated the Rabbi said, "What's so funny?"

"Well!" said the Grandmother, "I'm not a member of this congregation."

Membership and affiliation aside, the most important lesson that we learn in life is that one day it will end, one day we are going to die.

That is the great lesson and gift of this week's parasha, Bereshit with its iconic tale of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Amidst all the lush greenery, flowing rivers and natural beauty of the garden, at its center stood two trees. All of the trees and their fruits were permitted to human beings as food, except for the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life.

2:16 "God Eternal then commanded the man saying, "You may eat all you like of every tree in the garden - (17) but of the Tree of All Knowledge you may not eat, for the moment you eat of it you shall be doomed to die."

When they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the knowledge they got was that one day they were going to die. Before the forbidden fruit they didn't even know death was part of the equation. Now they know and it scares them; *to death*. They like the garden, life there is beautiful, they don't want it to end and standing right next to the Tree of Knowledge is the answer to their anxiety – the Tree of Life. One bite from that fruit and they will live forever. This terrifies God.

3:22 God Eternal then said, "Look, the humans are like us, knowing all things. Now they may even reach out to take fruit from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever." (23) So the Eternal God drove them out of the Garden of Eden to work the soil from which they had been taken.

God kicks them out of the Garden – not as punishment but as a blessing, if they think they will never die then how will they truly live? If you have eternity then there is no urgency for anything, with unlimited tomorrows, everything can wait.

The German existentialist Martin Heidegger in his masterwork Being and Time, taught this, he said that in order to truly live authentically we have to confront death head-on. Knowing that I am going to die is what allows me to truly live.

Heidegger wrote:
If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself.[1]

But as Ernest Becker wrote in his Pulitzer Prize winning masterwork, The Denial of Death even though we objectively know that we are all going to die, we don't actually believe what we know to be true.

Becker's work is important because of his astute observation that our obsession with not dying actually gets in the way of our fully living.

We are so focused on out-witting, out-lasting and out-playing death, staying in our own Garden of Eden that we make amazingly selfish choices in life. We setup what Becker called "immortality systems" – non-rational belief structures that give way to the belief that we are immortal.

For example, we try to buy immortality by accumulating possessions and wealth - as if our things will somehow protect us when death comes knocking.

We take on heroic roles in our business or our household, we think that if we make ourselves indispensable – death can't touch us. "I can't die this week; I have a sales meeting on Thursday."

Judaism suggests a different approach to death and to life. Rather than deny death – Jewish tradition instructs us to embrace it. Judaism teaches, 'live each day like it is your last because you don't know, it very well may be' (Shabbat 153b).

Imagine, as God does in this parasha if human beings directed all the energy they focus on not dying toward the more sacred goal of truly living. How would you fill each moment of every day if you truly knew and understood that you will never get that moment back, once it has passed it is gone forever?

The psalmist declares: "The span of our life is seventy or eighty years and they pass by speedily and we are unaware; Teach us therefore to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:10) The wise person our tradition teaches, counts

[1] Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (1927).

each day and makes each day count. Knowing that our days are numbered helps us clarify our priorities and our purpose.

Our most precious possession is not money or things, you can always get more of those – our most precious and finite possession is time.

Thoreau wrote: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not when I had come to die discover that I had not lived."[2]

When Adam and Eve are kicked out of the Garden the torah records the very first thing they do. "The man now was intimate with his wife: she became pregnant and give birth to Cain…" (4:1). They have a child – the very realization of "I'm not going to live forever" is answered with our best attempt at immortality, progeny.

And so, a final question remains. Where is the true paradise? In the Garden of Eden where no one ever dies and time is limitless? Or East of Eden, outside the garden, where every moment is precious, every decision is life changing and the fruit, sometimes bitter – compels us to appreciate the sweet?

[2] Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854)