120
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A young rabbi stood on the bima delivering his Yom Kippur sermon. Wanting to make a strong impression he banged on the lectern as he loudly delivered the first line of his sermon, “Every member of this congregation will die someday!”

He paused and looked around at the somber look that had appeared on everyone’s face. Then he noticed one man in the front row who responded differently from everyone else. This woman was grinning at him!

Certain the woman in the front row had not heard him, the rabbi again thundered, “I tell you that everyone in this congregation will one day die!” He looked down at the front row and saw that the woman was still smiling.

One last time the rabbi shouted, “True it is that eventually everyone in this congregation must die!” Seeing that the woman’s grin had only grown larger, the rabbi paused and asked, “Excuse me ma’am, are you amused by that idea?”

“Oh no,” replied the woman, “I’m not amused. I’m relieved… You see, I’m not a member of this congregation!”

In this week’s Torah portion we read:
He [Moses] said to them: I am now one hundred and twenty years old, I can no longer be active.” (Deuteronomy 31:2)

Biz hundert un tsvantsig. Ad meah v’esrim. Until 120. Jewish tradition teaches that we should live 120 years. That is how long Moses lived.

The number 120 years goes back to the book of Genesis. God had already sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden so they would not eat from the Tree of Life and be as gods, living forever. But God saw the sinfulness of man. “The Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for he also is flesh; yet his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3).

Sidney was called into court to testify. The attorney asked him his age. “84 until 120,” he answered.” “Please just answer the question, how old are you? “84 until 120.” The judge jumped in. “Sir, please give us a simple answer. How old are you?” “84 until 120.” Finally, the opposing attorney stepped forward. “Perhaps I can help. Until 120, how old are you? “84,” answered Sidney.

When asked their age, Jews traditionally say, “I am ____ years old, until 120.” That is the upper limit.

In truth, I have never known anyone who made it to 120. I have known a handful of people who made it over 100; in more than 20 years as a rabbi the oldest person I have officiated at a funeral for was 104, I pray you all best that record. Maybe with advances in science, better knowledge of how to take care of ourselves some will. But realistically the Psalmist came closer to the reality. “The days of our lives are three score and ten, or if given the strength four score” (Psalms 90:10). The Psalmist says that we will live from seventy to eighty; with better health care most live a bit longer. But nobody lives forever.

I have mentioned before that it’s a well known fact that every rabbi has 10 sermons that they just give over and over again. Ten themes that are just on a loop repeating till you could give them yourselves. By the way, if you could give my sermon without me having to, I wouldn’t need to say it because you wouldn’t need to hear it.

Maybe at my own funeral you will list them off, such a eulogy, honestly would be the greatest compliment.

I’ll give you the first one. It’s this one, we are all going to die, even non members, once we learn that life is finite, we learn how we want to live.

Tuesday night we will celebrate the holiest day of the year Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur more than any other day, we confront our mortality. We wear white like the simple white shroud used to dress the dead. We avoid food, drink, sex, comfortable shoes, physical work, as we separate ourselves from the material world. We say yizkor for those loved ones who have died. And we speak about how “on the fast of Yom Kippur, it is sealed . . . who shall reach the measure of their days and who shall not reach the measure of their days.” On Yom Kippur we confront our deaths so that we can better know how to live our lives.

Yom Kippur is about death because death has something important to teach life. The Psalmist prayed: “Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Confronting the reality of death forces us to give up all the rationalizations, the excuses, the defenses, the self-deception that keep us from filling our days with life — from pursuing our dreams, reaching for our ideals, deepening our relationships, cherishing sacred moments. Knowledge of death is the ultimate solvent. The harsh truth that no one has an infinite number of tomorrows dissolves away all that obscures our vision of what really matters in life, and how we have repeatedly been distracted and drawn astray, how we have been negligent, oblivious, evasive, and foolish. It’s painful. But it allows us to begin again — to correct the patterns of self-destructive behavior, to loosen the lies that bind us, to apologize and make repair what we’ve broken. Today, we confront death so that tomorrow, we might begin a life renewed.

In his book The Ten Journeys of Life, Rabbi Michael Gold shared a thought that though quite simple I found profoundly insightful and helpful as a parent.

Suppose you have a teenage son and you want him to clean up his room. If you say, clean up your room when you have some free time, it will never get done. But if you say, clean up your room by this Friday night or else, it puts a time limit on the work.

Knowing that we are only given so much time to accomplish what we need to accomplish in this world focuses the mind, forces us to do what we need to do.

There is a Buddhist folk saying that in order to be a happy person, you must contemplate your own death five times a day.

In order to enjoy the present, we have to remember that life is a finite gift. We only have so many days on this Earth, and it is up to us to use them as best we can. We only have so many opportunities to connect with others, to share our love with family and friends, to do good works in our community and for the world.

We only have so many opportunities because of our deadline and their deadline to repair our relationships, to give the love, attention we have been with holding. And life is similarly too short to waste it in petty disputes and temper tantrums.

We only have so many opportunities to save a life, including our own.

Here's the sermon, yet again, we have to remember that we are going to die, so that we can appreciate the precious few years we have been given to live.

When we each stop forgetting that message I'll stop giving it, or I'll stop because…

Shabbat Shalom.