More Days Behind Me Than Ahead of Me
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom
September 6, 2019

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."

Yesterday I turned 49, Michael and Dina turned 65 on the same day, GO VIRGOS!

Forty-nine is a pretty significant number, not only because it's one away from 50, but I am pretty sure, even if I keep going to the gym 5 days a week and do all the things my doctor says that I have more days behind me than I have ahead of me. That is a sobering thought. But it is also a very Jewish one. I'll come back to that in a moment.

One of the blessings and the curses of being a Rabbi is that I think about death a lot. I think about it in terms of historical sufferings of the Jewish people, I think about it as a reflection of the injustice and inhumanity in the world; but most of all I think about it in the lives of our congregation and that leads me to think about it in my own.

In all truth, I don't consider it a curse in any way, the reminder that I am going to die is what helps teach me how to live.

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." The wise person our rabbis teach counts each day and makes each day count. Knowing that our days are numbered helps us clarify our priorities and our purpose.

The German existentialist Martin Heidegger in his masterwork Being and Time, taught the same thing, 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.

This was the big deal with The Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge – the knowledge they get is that one-day they are going to die. Which means the converse is also true right now they are alive, a fact that had been lost on them up to that moment. That's why the very next action is that they become aware they have bodies and that they are naked. Nothing wakes you up out of a dream like state than suddenly realizing you have no pants on!

Knowing we are going to die puts our life, our priorities, our decisions into perspective. The problem as Heidegger and the Torah point out is that we deny this to ourselves.

Ernest Becker in his Pulitzer Prize winning masterwork, The Denial of Death wrote that 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.

It reminds me of William Saroyan's famous line: "Everybody has got to die, but I always believed an exception would be made in my case."

Not for me, every birthday for me is a reminder that I will have less of these than I have already had of these, so I better not squander them and their lessons.

So as I enter the second half or maybe the fourth quarter of my existence here on earth I am ever more aware of the truly amazing thing it is to be alive, to be in love, to be a parent, to be in relationship with people and to be present for so many milestone events.

In Judaism our tradition teaches that we should say 100 blessings a day, I have always found it hard to get to 25 blessings and that includes counting the ones before and after meals. But when I think about my own mortality, almost everything is a blessing, every moment of meaningful connection, every breath, every loving conversation and interaction, those are precious.

And the curses? When I think about the reality, which is true for all of us that one day I will die, the curses are when I waste my time or when people waste it for me.

I have become impatient in my relatively young old age; a clock is ticking, and I don't want to spend it on frivolous or silly things; and I certainly don't like when people spend it for me.

What's the great sin of the modern world – when people or machines steal our time. That

But that means then that when people give us their time, their attention, look up from their screens and focus on us they are truly blessing us with a gift.

We have a family in our congregation that doesn't give traditional birthday presents at children's parties, instead they give a promise to have a play date, to spend time with their friend. Being present is the present.

I've also reached the age when I don't really get gifts for my birthday anymore. Our daughter who will turn 8 in a few weeks has been working on her list since her last birthday. Me I get cards, sometimes art and pictures. My siblings and I have exchanged the same $25 amazon gift certificate back and forth for more years than I can count. But the only gift I really want and the one I receive with tremendous joy and appreciation is the gift of time.

We had a family dinner last night, I went fishing with my brother a few weeks ago for a long weekend, I had the peace and quiet to sit and read on our deck in the beautiful fleeting days of summer.

Being 49 reminds me of two things, one I have lived a relatively long time and two I have a lot more living I want to do.

As we enter into this High Holy Days our tradition instructs us to imagine our own death. That's why we dress in white and fast on Yom Kippur, that's why there is such an emphasis on Tshuvah on making amends. Judaism teaches: live each day like it is your last because you don't know, it very well may be (Shabbat 153b).

It's a wonderful lesson for any time of year, really for every moment of every day. Thinking about dying in not like thinking about breathing, where when you think about it you forget how to do it. When you think about dying you remember what it means to live.

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."

As early 20th century American author Alice Morse Earle famously wrote, "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present." In this coming New Year unwrap the gift of life… and death and live, live like you're dying and you'll more fully appreciate that you haven't yet.