LIVE LIKE YOU'RE DYING
Rosh Hashanah 5773 – Temple Judea
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

VIDEO: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vGKE-Q6m3I&feature=g-upl

Millie accompanied her husband Maurice to the doctor's office. After he had given Maurice a full check up, the doctor called Millie into the office alone. He said, "Maurice is suffering from a serious disease brought on by extreme stress. If you don't do the following, your husband will die. Each morning wake him up gently with a big kiss, then fix him a healthy breakfast. Be pleasant at all times and make sure he is always in a good mood. Cook him only his favorite meals and allow him to relax after eating. Don't burden him with any chores, and don't discuss your problems with him; it will only make his stress worse. Don't argue with him, even if he criticizes you or makes fun of you. Try to relax him in the evening by giving him massages. Encourage him to watch all the sports be can on TV, even if it meanings missing your favorite programs. And most importantly, every evening after dinner do whatever it takes to satisfy his every whim. If you can do all of this, every day, for the next six months, I think Maurice will regain his health completely."

On the way home, Maurice asked Millie: "What did the doctor say?"

"He says you're going to die."

Jokes can make a devastating point while defusing anxiety at the same time. That's why there are so many jokes about death; it scares us to death.

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

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.

We are so focused on out-witting, out-lasting and out-playing death 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. There is not a gated community in the country that can guard against death.

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 budget meeting on Thursday."

But it's not Survivor. In the end everyone gets voted off the island.

Judaism suggests a different approach to death, a much better approach. 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).

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 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.*

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 Becker, Heidegger and the Torah point out is that we deny this to ourselves.

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."

People ask me what I like best about being a Rabbi. I wanted to be a rabbi since I was 15 years old and on most days I find meaning and delight in everything I do. But when I am asked to pick just one reason, I honestly answer that the most meaningful experience I have as a Rabbi is performing funerals and consoling the bereaved. I am not saying that I love these moments, the pain and heartache of the bereaved weighs heavily on my heart. And yet I know that I am so privileged to hear incredible stories and memories of your loved ones, I know that their memories are blessings in my life, for the life they led and the lessons they leave behind.

For me, confronting death and dying on a regular basis is the most meaningful aspect of being a rabbi. Constantly being reminded of death, teaches me how to live.

I'm not unique, palliative care nurses and hospice caregivers have the same experience. The work they do, the heroic empathy and boundless kindness they show our loved ones, the dignity they give to the dying. They are truly angels of compassion.

One such caregiver is Bronnie Ware a hospice nurse in Australia, who spent hours by the bedsides of her patients, talking with them and listening to their stories.

In her conversations she would ask her patients, "Do you have any regrets?" They answered honestly; with the clarity that comes from knowing that their own death was near. Ms. Ware wrote a book about these conversations; it's title: "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying."

Before I list them – I want you to do something, and it's really the whole point of this sermon. Ask yourself, are you living the life you intended for yourself? If, and God forbid, if, you were to die today would you have any deep, personal regrets?
I don't mean what is on your Bucket List (Sky diving, travelling to some exotic local, learning to speak Mandarin).

My question is deeper, more personal. If you could change anything about your life before its too late what would it be?

The five most common answers that Ms. Ware heard to those questions were these:

1) I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
Is your life in line with your values? The High Holy Days implore us to examine our lives, to look at our past year, and all of the past years and ask ourselves, "Am I being true to myself?"

I know many of us can't answer that in the affirmative. So often we live our lives in terms of what others expect of us.

What are the dreams you have deferred because you were more concerned with doing what others expected of you? What can you do in the years you have left to be true to yourself?

It was Shakespeare in "Hamlet" who wrote: "To thine own self be true," and the next words in the passage carry this thought further still. "And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man."

We cannot control how we die, but we all have a choice in how we live. Have the courage, the determination to live a life true to yourself, so you can be **true** not false to others.

2) I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
Ware heard this regret from every male patient and every working women she cared for. "They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship." They regretted the long hours spent in the office doing some task they thought was important instead of being home for dinner, attending a child's performance or spending time with family and friends.

Work is important, for many of us including myself what we do for a living is much more than a job its a calling, a passion. But even that phrase, "what we do for a living" illustrates the point. Too often we confuse the grammar: We live in order to work, not work in order to live.

At the end of our work days (if they even have a defined end) we all face a similar dilemma: "Do I spend another half an hour at work to get something extra done, or do I go home and play with my kids, take a walk with my spouse, or spend time with a friend?"

Clayton Christenson, is a professor at the Harvard School of Business, in his book, "How Will You Measure Your Life?" he offers a model of how to make that, "should I stay or should I go" decision by applying business theory to this eternal dilemma.

As an aside I want to suggest that if I can recommend one book for you to read this year…read The Torah.

But if you're going to read *two* books, read "How Will You Measure Your Life?" – it's that good.

Christenson explains that IN LIFE like in business we each have limited resources: time, energy, talent and wealth. With every moment of our time, every decision about how we spend our energy, our talent and our money, we are making a statement about what really matters to us.

You can talk all you want about having a clear purpose in your life, but ultimately this means nothing if you are not investing the resources you have in a way that is consistent with your purpose. If the decisions you make about where to invest your blood, sweat and tears are not consistent with the person you aspire to be, you'll never become that person.

Work brings a sense of fulfillment – but it's not all there is to life, its not even close.

3) I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
Ware discovered that many of her dying patients "suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others..." leading to the sad refrain, "Why didn't I tell that person how I was really feeling?"

We must learn to express our feelings now, not when it's too late. Tell people you love them. Tell them you appreciate them. If they can't accept your honesty or react in a different way than how you hoped it doesn't matter. What matters is that you tell them. Of course we have to express our feelings sensitively, respectfully, judiciously and in a non-combative way. But above all, they should not be buried in our psyches, where they fester and lead to regret.

It takes courage; it takes courage to express your feelings, especially if you're not doing OK and need help, or if you've never expressed honest feelings before. But pride is such a waste of time and so is fear – and a clock is ticking.

4) I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
Each of us can point to one or two friendships we've unintentionally neglected when life got busy. We hope that the bonds of friendship are strong enough to endure such neglect, but they seldom are. Even the most committed friends stick around for only so long before they choose to invest their own time, energy and friendship elsewhere. When they do, the loss is ours – not there's.

Ms. Ware reminds us that, "Everyone misses their friends when they are dying. "People want to get their financial affairs in order if possible. But it is not money or status that holds the true importance for them... In the end those things don't hold your hand when you're dying, they don't walk with you through the rough patches in life. In the end it all comes down to love and relationships. That's all that remains in the final weeks - love and relationships."

I know too many lonely people with hundreds of Facebook friends. We can change that right now, in this New Year, when you drive home this afternoon call a friend you've neglected, wish them *Shanah Tovah* and make a plan to get together. Do it today before its too late.

5) I wish that I had let myself be happier.
One of the things that endeared Ms. Ware to her patients was her sunny and happy personality. It's amazing to think about it, how can a person who helps people die

be so filled with joy and happiness? One of Ms. Ware's patients asked her this very question and her answer is so important. She explained: "Happiness is a choice, and one I try to make every day. Some days I can't. Like you, I've had a hard life. But rather than dwelling on what's wrong and how hard I've had it I try to find the blessings in each day and appreciate the moment I am in." And then Ms. Ware expressed her key to happiness, the reason why she did this important work of caring for the dying. 'By making someone else happy, I make myself happy.'

The path to happiness in life and relationships is not <u>just</u> about finding someone who you think is going to make **you** happy. Rather, the reverse is equally true: the path to happiness is about finding someone who **you want** to make happy, someone whose happiness is worth devoting **yourself to**. If you are fortunate to have that person in your life – go home and make them happy. If they are here and listening to this sermon, there is a good chance they will do the same for you. If you don't have that person just yet – borrow one. Seriously, volunteer at our homeless shelter, with our tutoring program for homeless children or in any of the myriad of ways you can be of service to others. Bring happiness to another and I promise you will find it for yourself.

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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."

Live like you're dying. Suck the marrow out of life; leave nothing on the table, a life without regrets.

- Be true to yourself – be who you want to be
- Leave work and go home to your family
- Have the courage to speak your mind
- Nurture and maintain your friendships
- Happiness is a choice, choose to be happy.

Start today, start now.

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 New Year unwrap the gift of life… and death and live, live a life without regrets.

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