

"BEYOND LIFE AND BACK AGAIN"

It is the custom amongst Jews that we wear white garments on Yom Kippur. Thus, the special kittel (white robe) or at least white cap that the men wear on this day. Formerly, women too would wear white clothing on Yom Kippur. Why this preference for white? R. Mordecai Jaffe, author of the Levushim, gives us two reasons. The first is that this is the day of forgiveness of sins, and we therefore wear white which symbolizes the purity of the angels, the malakhei hasharet. This is a satisfactory and relevant explanation. Purity, represented by white, is certainly appropriate to Yom Kippur.

However, there is a second reason offered by the same author which is radically different from this first interpretation. The white gown, he says, is the color of the takhrikhim, the shrouds. The kittel, indeed, is a shroud. Yom Kippur is painted white in order to remind us of yom hamitah, the day of death!

Now, of these two reasons, the first -- that we play the role of angels -- certainly seems more attractive. The other reason, rehearsing for death, strikes one, at first glance, as morbid. Is this a proper posture for a day on which we recite the majestic, life-affirming words, of the Prophet, ki lo ehpotz bemot hamet, ne'eum hashem, ve'hashivu vi'heyu, "For I do not desire for anyone to die, says the Lord God; so repent -- and live!" Is not our sacred literature so filled with eloquent expressions of the love of life and the abhorrence of death that it is actually wrong to consider this holy day as a token of death?

Yet, when we think of it, there is much to confirm that second

reason. The kittel and the tallit are truly the garments that are reminiscent of death; they are the shrouds. We recite the viduy or confessional; one does the same before death. The day is concluded with the recitation of the shemot -- the Shema, Barukh shem Hashem Hu Haelokim -- even as every Jew is instructed to utter these as his last words on earth. The custom in many communities is to light not only yahrzeit candles for the deceased, but a candle for each of the living as well -- as it were, premature yahrzeit candles! We refrain on this Yom Kippur day from food, drink, shoes, washing, ⁿannoiting, cohabitation -- as if our bodily processes had come to the final halt. We proclaim before God: meh anu, mah hayvenu... what are we, what is our life and strength and wisdom -- nothing! And we begin the day with Kol Nidrei -- abrogating the vows of the past, as if the past itself had been wiped clean, no longer exists!

How can we explain this acting-out of death on this day when we constantly plead for life?

I find in this symbolism a number of profound thoughts that go beyond Yom Kippur, and enlighten us about the most significant aspects of life and destiny. They touch our very essence as human beings and mortals, and it is worth pondering them on this holiest day of the year.

II

The first thing we must do is get rid of that fastidiousness that makes us recoil in horror from thinking of death because of its morbidity. Morbidity seems morbid only to those who would like to go through life under the illusion that they will live forever. But

whistling in the dark is for frightened young boys, not for mature people. Superficial individuals, whose lives are empty, prefer not to confront the most elementary fact of nature, death, and so try to disguise it; they cast a green carpet over the yawning abyss of their own inner lives and think that thereby they have staved off the final moment. But that is childish.

My point is this: only by play-acting the reality of death in symbolic form, do we adjust to the idea of our own mortality. The very fact of wearing shrouds once every year makes death itself less overwhelming. It gives us an equanimity and composure we could never get otherwise, it develops our own human maturity, and teaches us to accept extinction and suffering with dignity and grace.

Consider this: a truly religious, pious Jew does not welcome death. Of course not -- life is too precious, and only in this world can man serve the Lord, observe the Torah, and progress spiritually. But neither is a true Jew terrified by death. He does not panic at the thought of contemplating it. He is neither fascinated by it, nor is he seized by hysteria and consternation at it and repelled by its morbidity. The reason -- because he has experienced it symbolically every Yom Kippur, and so he has become accustomed and habituated to it. He has therefore also mastered it. He knows that there is a spiritual dimension to man that ~~not~~ only survives but that prevails after the biological functions have all ceased. Thus, the equanimity of a pious Jew in the face of death -- he writes his will, prepares his shrouds, all while in full health, and without sequeamishness. If sick, he recites the viduy or confession and does not consider it a bad omen,

a sure sign that all is lost; by no means! He does these things without dread and dismay and without self-pity because he has faithfully gone through the symbolic anticipations of it every year.

Franz Rosenzweig, the great Jewish philosopher of Frankfurt in the early part of this century, has told us of his own experience with impending death. Once accepted, he informs us, once it becomes more familiar, it loses its terrors. And, "the less I fear death... the more freely can I live."

III

But there is more to this symbolism than the removal of fear and revulsion. This annual preexperience of death helps us to live not only calmer, but deeper. The awareness of our own mortality gives us the impetus to a more realistic perspective, a more honest and intelligent ordering of the priorities in our lives, a preference of authentic values and shrugging off of the frivolities that otherwise insinuate themselves into our lives and our thinking. Yazkir lo yom hamitah, to keep in mind the day of death, to be aware of one's own inevitable mortality, is the greatest spur to teshuvah (repentance), to a rediscovery of what is really of lasting value and what is only relative and secondary. When you realize that life doesn't last forever, you get on with the real business of living meaningfully and dispense with the nonsense that usually crowds out the significant from our limited vision.

Yom Kippur as a reminder of yom hamitah, as a foretaste of extinction, tells the man obsessed with his fanatical and sing^{le}-minded

pursuit of wealth of professional success: hold on for a day! Here you are -- without food in your stomach, without water to wet your parched lips, without leather to bind your feet, bedecked in the white and tallit of takhrikhim. Think of it -- there is something no money or prominence can stave off indefinitely, no stocks or bonds or deals can help at such a time. Ki lo be'moto yikah hakol -- you can't take it with you. Why, then, pursue your ambitions so unthinkingly, so totally excluding the really enduring values from your life? -- or is it that the pursuit itself is only an elaborate disguise to keep you from confronting the ultimate reality: Ki sof kol ha-adam lamut? Perhaps you ought to tend to things that are quieter, less material, more meaningful, more lasting? Perhaps tend ^{too} ~~for~~ to your own neshamah, to wife and children and parents, to people and mitzvot and Torah.

It tells the young person concerned only with social status: slow down your hectic pace; in the long run it makes no difference. There is no applause and no envy in the grave. Death is democratic. With no water to wash yourself, no perfumes to anoint you, no marital matches to distinguish you and propel you into prominence, no wealth to win -- Yom Kippur is indeed a reminder of the equality of death, and the frivolity and folly of wasting a life in frantically climbing the social ladder. It forces you to consider that ultimately, no matter what the trappings and trimmings one has acquired, all are ultimately equal: rich and poor, famous and obscure. And there is also an ultimate inequality before God -- the inequality of rasha and tzaddik, of the mean and the kind, the pitiless and the gentle, the loving and the indifferent, the good and the evil. These are the things that

count -- what you are or have made of yourself, not what you have or are considered by others. These are the true priorities -- the values of love, faith, spirit, goodness, Godliness, gentleness -- values which we had neglected and relegated to the periphery of our lives. All the rest is interesting, perhaps, but -- trivial, frivolous, dispensable.

In this sense, Yom Kippur as a foretaste of yom hamitah is an education; of, if you will, a revelation, a sudden, apocalyptic disclosure of what is really important and what is not, who is really eminent and who is not, which values are worthy and which are not. To borrow the words of Moses in another context: Lu hakhmu yaskilu zot, yavinu le'ahritam, if men were wise they would understand this and not fail to consider their own end, their own mortality.

IV

But there is a third element that begs to be considered. The emphasis of mortality on Yom Kippur directly enhances our joy in and appreciation of life. We live better and more fully the entire year if we follow through this lesson on Yom Kippur. Think of it this way: on Yom Kippur we dramatize death -- through clothing, self-denial, and so forth. But in a sense we experience the same thing almost every day of our lives. I refer to sleep, about which the Rabbis (Ber.57b) said that it is a sixtieth part of death. The lowered pulse, reduced vitality, unconsciousness -- all of these are partial physical symptoms of what has been called the eternal sleep. Now consider what the Jewish

tradition has done with this. Upon awakening, we recite Modeh, thanking God for returning our souls mercifully. We recite the blessing hamahzир neshamot lefegarim metim, blessing God who restores the soul to the dead body, i.e., the sleeping body. Our nocturnal brush with death has taught us gratitude for life. And then follows the list of blessings known as birkhot hashahar, the morning blessings, in which we express our amazement at all the marvelous phenomena of God's glorious universe which we would otherwise overlook. We express sheer delight and exquisite joy at the wonders of the world as if we were experiencing them for the very first time -- as if this is the first time we heard the rooster crow his welcome to the dawn, (הַנֶּחֱמָה לְבֹקֶר), the first time we were privileged to see, (שִׁקְחָה לְיוֹמָה), the first time we were able to appreciate freedom, (מִתּוֹר אִסּוּרִים), and manliness, (רִיבּוֹת הַחַיִּים), the earth and the waters (רִיבּוֹת הַמַּיִם), clothing (גִּדּוּל הַבְּשָׂמִים), and beauty (יְפִיּוּת הָעוֹלָם), and power (אֵלֹהֵי הַקֶּזֶז). The intimation of death has, by the lesson of contrast, taught us to appreciate life, not to take it for granted, to enjoy every last minute and atom of it. And that is what Yom Kippur does to us this day. By enshrouding us in kittel and tallit and making us fast and putting us through the paces of yom hamitah, it forces us to mean what we say when we cry out "give us life," "inscribe us in the book of life." For just as no one can appreciate a sunset ^{as} like one who has never seen before, and the rustling of a tree in a gentle breeze ^{as} like one who has never heard before, so only when we contemplate the need of life does life itself suddenly appear to us

in all the magical, miraculous, magnificent hues with which the Creator painted it. To love life, to enjoy it, you must first imagine that you had lost it.

So once again, the death-symbolism of Yom Kippur is anything but morbid and depressing. A poet (T.C. Williams) once wrote: "Death is an angel with two faces:/ To us he turns/ A face of terror, blighting all things fair;/ The other burns/ With glory of the Stars, and love is there."

V

Indeed, love is the fourth lesson the kittl teaches us. The symbolic experience of death highlights love, and lets us know there are things worth dying for; and, at the same time, there are loves strong enough to conquer death itself. Solomon put it eloquently: ki azah kamavet ahavah, for love is as strong as death.

Thus, the Rabbis told us: ein hatorah mitkayemet ela be'mi shememit et atzmo aleha, Torah can survive only for one who is willing to suffer and die for it. When you love Torah unto death, only then can it live for you and give you life and the reason for and sweetness of life.

Hasidism taught that prayer is meaningful only when your ecstasy is so great that you feel your life ebbing away. The Baal Shem Tov said that he is surprised when he finds himself alive after his tefillah. The Rebbe of Apt used to distribute his worldly goods to his family before prayer: he was ready to expire out of sheer love of God.

This is a love as strong as death.

And that is the nature of Yom Kippur's symbolism. Death focuses our spiritual and psychic energies on love -- love of God and love of man, love of Israel and love of Torah. To know death is to affirm life and what makes life worth living: love. Ki azah kamavet ahavah.

VI

Finally, there is a fifth element in this death-symbolism of Yom Kippur, and it is perhaps the most radical. By donning our shrouds and living a non-physical existence, we are experiencing a foretaste of death as an introduction to rebirth. Like a seed planted in the earth which must die and decompose before a new plant or flower is brought forth from it, so Yom Kippur teaches us to erase the seamy side of the past by symbolically dying, and thus being reborn into a new identity.

The two main themes of Yom Kippur are teshuvah (repentance) and kapparah (atonement or forgiveness.) The first is the initiative of man, the second that of God. Both are an act of negating the past and starting over again. Repentance, according to Maimonides, means that one must change so radically that it is as if he proclaimed, ani aher v'eini oto ha-ish she'asah otan ha-maasim, I am now somebody else, a different person, and not the same person at all who committed those deeds which I so regret. And kapparah means that God views us differently, that He is willing to substitute a more idealized picture for our past reality. Both thus imply rebirth into a new identity.

And there is nothing that can so effectively dramatize rebirth as the death that precedes it. The annual rehearsal of death at Yom Kippur is thus a profound spur to change, to transformation, to growth.

Now, let us not be uncomfortable with this idea because it sounds too mythological. The terms "death" and "rebirth" are here meant not mythologically but symbolically. Judaism does not, of course, deny the plain biological facts, but it understands life as something beyond the cold scientific definition of life as the ability of organic macromolecules to replicate themselves. Death and rebirth are moving symbols of spiritual quietus and resurrection, of ~~moral~~ ^{moral} paralysis and progress, of religious stagnation and advancement. Rebirth is the symbol of a second chance that is given to us every Yom Kippur, a second chance for those who, though biologically alive, are spiritually moribund. It is in this sense that Yom Kippur signals the death that is the prelude to rebirth. We are on our way to creating new identities.

That, in a national sense, was the famous vision of the atzamot ha-yeveshot, the valley of dry bones, by the prophet Ezekiel. He saw the corpses of Israel arising from their graves and reassuming human form. What he ^e ~~meant~~, as he himself interpreted the vision, was that Israel would get another chance, that after the death of exile and all its shame, Israel would be reborn into independence and freedom and dignity.

That, perhaps, is why we wear the kittel, the shrouds, on Passover at the Seder, as well as Yom Kippur. We affirm that freedom is not just a political concept of liberation, but it involves equally as much

act of spiritual adventure and climbing -- of death and moral rebirth. The kittl is the symbol of and challenge to death at the same time: we are an eternal people; we can emerge from exile to independence, from shame to dignity, from idolatry to Judaism, from death to life.

Indeed, this too may be the meaning, or one of the meanings, of the old Jewish custom of the groom wearing his kittl under the huppah. Bride and groom thus both wear white, both fast, and both recite the al heit confessional on their wedding day. Like Yom Kippur, this is for them the symbolic experience of stilling the past in order to experience a magnificent rebirth. The scattered loyalties, the tentative attractions, the itinerant affections, and the hesitating commitments are all gone -- dead and buried. Now, each tells the other, I am a new person. Our marriage gives me a new identity - one in which my physical, psych^{ic}, and spiritual energies are focused on you alone. Indeed, today I get not only a new but also an expanded identity -- one that includes not only me but you as well.

For us as individuals, this rebirth theme is psychologically important. One of the key issues in modern literature and contemporary life is the "identity crisis." Young people, and even not so young people, are on the search for their true identities. But Judaism teaches that no one has, or should have, a single, static identity that stays the same forever. Every year we must grow by recreating that identity. On Kol Nidre night we dissolve it, we abrogate the past along with our vows and promises, and we stand naked before the Lord, almost without any identity at all. We play the role of ghosts, in shrouds and all,

to signify that we have the right before God to abolish the past if we really care to, and to start all over again: ani aher, as some one else, some one new, experiencing rebirth. Identity cannot be discovered; it must be created.

Prof. Heschel tells that years ago there used to be a quaint story related in the Hebrew books for Talmud Torah students. A youngster was very absent-minded, always forgetting things. So one day, before going to bed, he left himself a note: "Your shoes are on the floor, your shirt on the chair, your hat on the rack, your books on the table, and you are in bed." In the morning he gathered together his articles according to his written memo, but when he looked for himself in bed, he could not find himself.

Yom Kippur's message of rebirth tells us that a growing identity, going through death and rebirth, can never be the same this year as last year, today as yesterday. One who gets up, arouses himself, and develops, is reborn, will not find himself sleeping in yesterday's lowly level. A mentch must be a mehalekh, a man must grow and develop and move ahead. It is ridiculous for an intelligent person to ask, "Who am I?" The answer may be disappointing. The "I" must always change, even be killed off in order to start again. The real question of identity is: what kind of person shall I become? And for this we must, as it were, allow part of ourselves to die and be reborn, thus advancing to even higher levels, le'eila u-le'eila. This is teshuvah.

VII

These, then, are some of the leading ideas that lie beneath the surface of the symbolism of Yom Kippur. This annual rehearsal of death is not at all morbid. It teaches us, first, not to fear death with anxiety and terror; it urges us to reorder the priorities of our lives; it gives us greater ability to drain every drop of joy and delight from God's world; it spurs us on to greater and more lasting love; and finally, it is the prelude to the great act of individual and national rebirth.

With such understanding comes a transformation not only of ourselves, but of the very meaning of the symbol. When the kittel as shroud has taught us this, then the kittel no longer represents merely a shroud -- but the pure whiteness of the angels! Accept deeply the second symbol, that of death, and you find yourself with the first -- life everlasting, ever fuller, ever deeper, ever purer. So the ghostly white turns into angelic white. The Yom Kippur service is no longer a rehearsal of death but a celebration of life. And on Yom Kippur we recite not only Shema Yisrael as does one with his last breath, but also Barukh shem kevod, which tradition teaches is reserved only for the angels, and which mortals may proclaim aloud only on Yom Kippur .

If we allow Yom Kippur to remind us of yom hamitah, the day of death, it will teach us to deserve and enjoy shenat hayyim, a year of life and health and peace.