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הרב נחום לאם

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Sermon-Appeal

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"MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH"

Perhaps the most devastating comment ever made on the nature of Man's whole life and all his so-called accomplishments, is contained in the words we recite after the

אדם יסודו מעפר וסופו לעפר, בנפשו יביא לחמו prayer: ונתנה חוקה
משול כחרס הנשבר, כחציר יבש, וכציץ נובל, כצל עובר, וכענן כלה,
וכרוח נושבת, וכאבק פורח, וכחלום יעוף.

"Man's origin is dust, and his end is also in dust. He earns his livelihood at the risk of his life. He is like fragile earthenware, like a fading flower, like the passing shadow, like dissipating clouds and blowing winds and floating dust and a transient dream".

Yes, Man's life is like all these things, and especially - woe unto him - like a passing shadow. For a young man who today worships may next year lie mangled on a cold, bloody battlefield. The mature head of a household who today is substantial and assured of financial security for himself, his wife and his children, may next year be driven to seek "relief". The man, woman and child who today is in the best of health, may soon be victimized by crippling paralysis, by dreaded heart disease, by terrorizing cancer. The world which today laughs and cries and goes about its usual business may next year be only a dim memory in the grim mushroom-cloud of atomic or hydrogen destruction. May G-d forbid such things to happen. But such things do happen. For all of Life is K'TZEIL OVEIR - like a passing shadow - nothing more.

But does that mean that Man must abandon himself to hopelessness? Is Man to despair because his life is so short, so insecure and insubstantial? If life is only a passing shadow, does that therefore mean that men can do nothing about it or with it, that it is meaningless?

Our Sages were quick to point out that such is not the case. For while Life is a shadow, it is still up to us to decide what kind of shadows our lives are going to be. For a shadow, insubstantial and immaterial though it be, does have constructive uses. For the weary traveller on a hot, dusty summer road, a shadow is a G-d-send. For the Bedouin in the blazing desert, the shadow of the oasis is Life's greatest relief. The shadow of a loving mother bending over the cradle will calm and soothe the weeping child. And the shadow of a strong father or a beloved mate will instil gladness and a sense of security in any soul. So a shadow though Life is, it is our duty to make it the right kind of shadow.

Our Rabbis meant just that when they declared, in their great wisdom, that: U'LVAI K'TZILO SHEL KOSSEL O K'TZILO SHEL ILAN VE'LO K'TZILO SHEL OFE B'SHA'AN SHE'HU AF. "If Man's Life can be no more than a shadow, let it be at least like the shadow of a wall, or certainly like the shadow of a tree, but never never like the shadow of a bird in flight".

The shadow of a bird in flight is absolutely of no use to anyone. It gives no shade, no comfort, no gladness. Even while the bird lives and does cast a shadow, that shadow is shifty and gives no benefit. Let Man make sure that his life is not that sort of passing shadow, where even while alive it is worthless..

The shadow of a wall is somewhat better. For while the sturdy wall exists, it casts a strong and beneficial shadow, under which others may rest and find comfort and security. Better than the bird, yes. But not good enough. For once that wall has toppled over, once it has "died", or ceased to exist, no shadow can be cast, and its use is a thing of the past. A man whose life is like the shadow of a wall will also be of use and comfort while alive. But Death will certainly kill him, and he is gone and forgotten; Life's shadow has passed.

What should the passing shadow of Life be like? Like the shadow of a tree. The majestic oak, even after it has died, cut by the woodsman's saw or cracked by the lightning of heaven, even then the shadow continues - somewhere, sometimes. For a branch or seed of that tree

has no doubt been planted someplace, and that branch or seed has become a new tree and given birth to a new, beautiful shadow. The shadow of a tree is only a shadow - but an eternal one. Death does not vanquish it. The shadow of a ~~tree~~ outlives the woodsman, the electric storm, it outlives even old age.

Poor man, cry our Sages, you who on this Holy Day and at these Memorial Services feel yourself at the mercy of Death, your life only a passing shadow, do not despair. See to it that your life is not like the passing shadow of the bird in flight, do not let it be even like the shadow of the wall. Do not allow Death to win. Be rather like the tree - cast your shadow onto Eternity. Continue to live even after Death. Continue the lives of your loved ones even after they have gone. Squeeze the pain and misery and sorrow out of Death. Yes, mortal man, let Death give birth - to Life. K'TZILO SHEL ILAN. Like the shadow of a tree.

As a Rabbi, I can testify that I have seen such things happen. Countless individuals who were religiously empty have drifted into the synagogue like derelict ships. People who ordinarily would not look into a synagogue, but have come only because of the death of a parent or spouse or child. And as a result of a year of Kaddish, they found the faith of Torah, they saw new horizons, their life took on new meaning. Death gave birth to Life. The comforting shadow of parents continues on and on. Life may be a passing shadow, but such a Life is not the passing shadow of a darting bird, nor that of a crumbling wall - but that of a majestic tree.

An old legend, which has become part of our Jewish folklore, tells of a famous Hebrew poet who sprouted Life even while he was in the grave. The tragic, melancholy, gifted poet Ibn Gabirol died in his early twenties - terribly lonely and forlorn. But before his death, the tale goes, he asked that he be buried with a fig in his hand. His will was carried out. And years later, a fig tree grew out of that grave and it bore the most beautiful fruit that was ever seen in all of Spain. The story is not only a legend. It is also a powerful moral lesson. And that is - that Death need not be the victor. Death can disfigure the face, drain the blood, stop the beating heart. But it need not snuff out the last seed of Life which can sprout afresh even from the grasp of Death itself. K'TZILO SHEL ILAN.

What, you will ask, is the way to do this? How can I draw a spark of Life out of the darkness of Death? Well, one way was ^{prescribed} by Yehudah Halevi, a contemporary of Ibn Gabirol. This noble and inspired Jewish poet wrote, and I quote in translation:

"When I remove from Thee, O G-d,

"I die whilst I live; but when

"I cleave to Thee, in Death I live again".

So that cleaving to G-d, living an inspired and religious and holy life, sticking to the ideals of our Torah, coming to shul every Sabbath rather than only on High Holidays, that is one way of cheating Death and being assured of Life Eternal, of "in Death I live again". Living for a principle and dying for a reason is not dying at all - it is only planting a new seed which will cast the same shadow.

Let no one speak, therefore, of the millions of martyrs tortured and killed in Europe as having been finished and destroyed by Death. Indeed, let no one tell me that the 6 million death-cries which shrieked across the accursed continent of Europe were really death-cries. No, no, no. They were 6 million voices crying out in chorus that their death-agonies were really birth-pangs, that in dying they were giving birth to a new and blessed revival of Judaism, that from their blood and ashes would rise the new, reconstituted State of Israel. If not for the 6 million there might never have been an Israel. This was not ordinary Death. This was a hard way of creating eternal Life. TSADDIKIM B'MISSASAM NIKRA'IM CHAYYIM, say our Rabbis, "The righteous, in death, are called living". When a man dies for righteousness, he is more alive than ever.

I wonder how many of us remember that terrific novel by Herman Melville, "Moby Dick". The very last few paragraphs will always haunt my memory. Ishmael, the narrator, and the rest of the whale-hunting crew had been tracking down the white whale, Moby Dick, for many months. Finally they found the mighty and awful sea-monster in Oriental waters, and gave him battle. But Moby Dick proved too strong for his pursuers. He quickly capsized the small harpoon-vessels sent out after him, and all hands drowned. In the churning, mad waters, he set upon the main ship, the Pequod, and in a few mighty strokes the giant whale wrecked the ship, and it too began to sink with all aboard it facing certain death.

Ishmael was the last man off the Pequod. He jumped into the violent, foaming waters, and prepared for a watery grave. On his right the Pequod was slipping out of sight; through the spray he saw, to the left, the departing Giant of the Deep, leaving only destruction and ruin in his wake. But as the water gathered round him and began to cover him, as the ocean was about to swallow him, he grabbed hold of a wooden object which suddenly floated past him. He managed to hold on to the strange object and was thus the only man to survive the ordeal. Then he looked upon the wooden object which saved his life - and, lo and behold, it was a coffin! A box of Death saved his Life. He found Life through Death.

And indeed, 1800 years before the author of this story was born, history recorded a similar incident not as fiction but as fact. The great, saintly sage, R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, was condemned to rot in a Roman prison in Jerusalem. But his students fooled their captors by carrying out their teacher in a closed coffin, telling the guards they were going to bury their dead master outside the city. The trick worked, and R. Yochanan proceeded to build the great academy of Yavneh, wherein were forged the Laws and Traditions which have sustained Jewish life until this very day. Two thousand years of great living - by virtue of a coffin. Life through death. It is the shadow of the tree.

My dear friends, we are gathered here on this Holy Day for Yizkor Services - to remember dear departed parents, relatives and children. And at a time of this sort, I appeal to you in the name of this synagogue, in the name of the Torah, in the name of dear life itself, DO NOT LET DEATH HAVE THE LAST SAY! Do not, on this great day, merely "remeber" your departed loved ones. DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!

What is it that you can do? You can recreate the lives of your parents and loved ones by implanting the seed of eternal life, of TORAS CHAYIM, of Jewish Education in the ways of the Living G-d, in the hearts and minds of West Side youngsters who study in our Hebrew School and are not charged one cent for this instruction. Our school board does not press an impoverished parent to the wall and ask for tuition fee or else no school. We invite the children, teach them Hebrew and History and Bible, and we are only too glad to do it.

But friends, this cannot be done without your help. We cannot instil a living faith and a lively knowledge and prevent the increase of dead souls and dead minds and dead hearts, unless you, at this occasion of remembering dear dead, respond liberally to our appeal and

thereby perpetuate their lives into Eternal Life.

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Let not Death be the victor on this Holy Day. Help us create Life. And if the lives of us and those who have gone before us are but as passing shadows, let them not be like the flighty shadows of the bird, nor the stolid, short-lived shadow of the wall; but the eternal, recreating, self-perpetuating shadow of the shade-tree. Like Ibn Gabirol, let a fruitful Tree of Life be fertilized by the cold grip of Death's Hand. Like Judah Halevi, let your parents live again in Death, and do so yourselves, by cleaving to G-d and His Torah. *Like Jacob be Ben-Yamin, not Ben-Oni* ... Like ~~Ismael, save the~~ R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, help us to build our Yavneh too, our school of learning, by grasping the coffins of the beloved, by acting in the name and memory of those we remember, and giving with an open hand to our noble cause.]

Let us hear your noble responses. Let us hear a chorus of voices singing out in sanctity, BILA HA'MAVESS LA'NETZACH, "Death hath vanished into Life Eternal", Death has certainly not put an end to our loved ones, for we by our actions today shall perpetuate their lives into Eternity by raising a generation of G-d-fearing, intelligent Jews and Jewesses.

May we by our philanthropy defeat the finality of the MALACH HA'MAVESS, and declare the victory of the forces of Life. Amen.

In place of Moby Dick illustration and R.Yochanan b. Zakkai story, use following:

Allow me to remind you of the one of the most touching scenes recorded in all of the Bible. Our mother Rachel was on her death-bed. Here she was, a young woman, in the prime of life, destined to die in child-birth as she gave birth to her second child. And something very strange happens. She is shown the child and she says: let him be called "Ben-Oni". And next to her bed stands her husband Jacob and he says, "No, his name shall not be 'Ben-oni'. His name shall be 'Ben-yamin'." How strange! Here is Jacob who loved his wife so dearly that he slaved for her as a shepherd for 14 long years to win her hand - and he turns down her death-bed wish.

What really happened? Just imagine yourselves present at that scene. Rachel, young, beautiful and dying, sees her child brought before her. Bitterness and resentment well up in her heart. Why must I die? Who is going to wake up in the middle of the night, my child, to feed you? Who is going to get up in the wee hours of a cold morning to clothe and comfort you? Why must Fate be so cruel to decree that I shall not enjoy my child, and that you shall grow up never knowing who your mother was? No, if my end is going to be in sorrow and pain, if my lot is misery, then your name shall be Ben-Oni, "the son of my bitterness". Let the stigma of my misery go with you throughout life, let people look at you, hear your name, and know that you carry misery and bitterness with you. Ben-Oni!

But then her loving, devoted husband turns to her and says, "No, my dearest wife. Your tragedy hurts me deeply enough - no man can ever measure it. But don't call that child the son of your affliction. No, Rachel dear, the bitterness will pass, the misery will go, and out of your pain and tragedy will come a bundle of joy, a son from you will have "nachass" wherever you will be, from this gloom will shine a ray of hope for all the world. Call him better "Ben-Yamin", "the son of my right hand", for he will always reflect on your courage and stamina and warmth of soul. He will be your continuing right hand, your pride and immortal joy. Don't let your bed of birth become a grave. Let rather your death-bed become a cradle, a cradle for that son in whose territory will be built - the BEIS HAMIKDASH! And so it was, that as Rachel died, she consented. From tragedy came a son of the right hand. From Death - Life. From a death-bed - a cradle. From a grave - a Temple.