

Death Gives Life Meaning

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5784

Friday afternoons right before Shabbat can be trouble; sometimes, big trouble. Bad stuff can happen in those final hours and even minutes before candle lighting. You might find yourself needing to buy a bike (if you missed that, check out my sermon from August 26 - it's a pretty good story). You might find yourself needing to run out and get some fresh dill, some wine, a pomegranate, a hallah...



All of the above.

In my house, it can be a bit of a stressful time. Sharon is usually working tirelessly to finish preparing Shabbat dinner, and I am trying to get everything ready for shul, and our kids are setting the table... hopefully :-)

About four months ago, I was rushing to get to Kabbalat Shabbat on time. I needed to reply to an urgent email. I grabbed my laptop in the kitchen as I was tying my shoelaces. But instead of opening the email I needed, I opened the newest one, which was from Ticketmaster announcing that Bruce Springsteen was coming to Boston at the end of August. And, of course, the email warned that tickets were selling out fast. I asked Sharon if she wanted to go.



“Yes, get five tickets for us!”

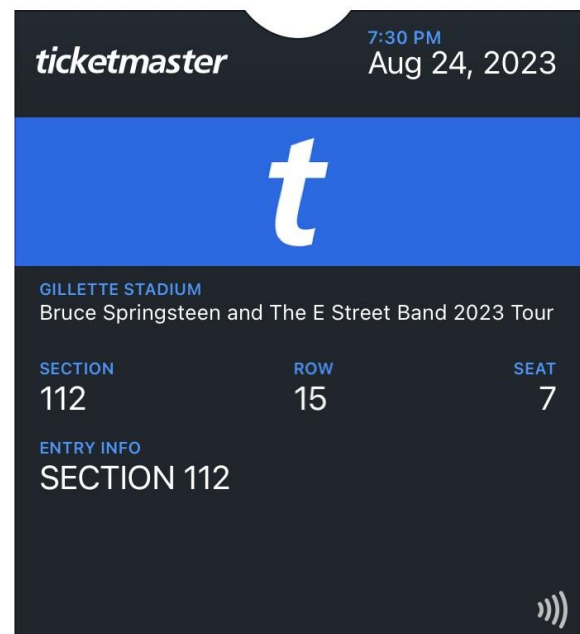
We had seen him ten years ago at the Garden, and it was certainly time to go again. His concerts are not just filled with amazing music, but he often interjects into his shows heart-felt mini-sermonettes on spiritual, emotional, philosophical, and political topics, which can be just as meaningful as his hits. I saw there was a show on Saturday night that would not work because of Shabbat, but the Thursday night performance looked good. I quickly logged into Ticketmaster and realized that all the available tickets were sold out and we could buy only resale.

Oy.

So, the tickets were pricey, but we weren't taking a family vacation, so we went for it. I found the section we wanted and bought them. And I still had enough time to get to shul! 😊 But then I looked at the confirmation email. Somehow, the tickets were for Saturday night.

This was not a small mistake. I was panicking and had no time to fix it. So I bought five more tickets. All was good - I figured I could sell the other five. Heading out, I looked at my phone - the new tickets were not in the section we had picked—no idea how that happened. I ran back inside and quickly bought five more. So, now I had 15 - not exactly cheap - tickets to see Bruce.

It was a bit of a summer stressor as I worried about selling them, and the truth is, it wasn't that easy to sell them without incurring a large loss.

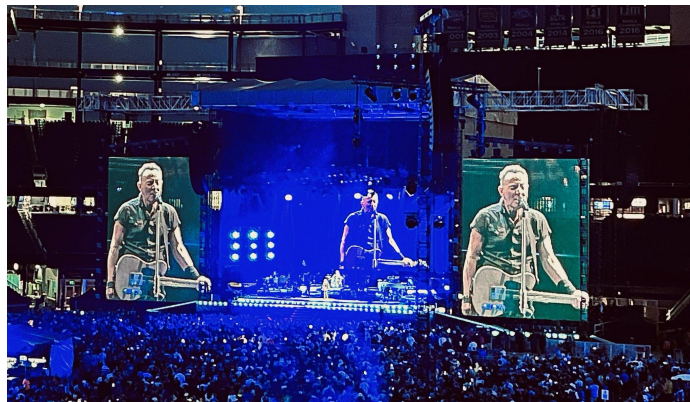


Luckily, our Emunah and JCDS and other connections paid off, and we eventually sold the other ten! Note to self - don't buy concert tickets right before Shabbat. And, if it can be avoided, don't buy any tickets on Ticketmaster, which takes \$40 on every ticket you buy or sell—a total scam.



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The concert lived up to its billing. The 73-year-old Springsteen and his E-Street Band played for 2 and 1/2 hours straight with powerful pieces and ended with most of his classics. One of the themes of the concert was death. He closed the show with “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” where he sings that death is not the end. There, he imagines a welcome visitation from the dead, suggesting that we have company in our grief.



Earlier in the show, Bruce gave what the Boston Globe called “The Sermon on Mount Gillette,” introducing the song: “Last Man Standing,” which is about the death of his friend, George Theiss (Tice), the last surviving bandmate from his first rock group. I really did feel like one of his disciples on the mountain.

He said: “Death gives you pause to think. It’s like you’re standing on the railroad tracks with a white-hot light of an oncoming train bearing down on you. It brings a certain clarity of thought and of purpose you may not have previously experienced.



“Death’s final and lasting gift to the living is an expanded vision of the possibilities of this life itself. When George passed away, shortly after, I wrote this song. It’s just about the passions we follow as children, not knowing where they are going to lead us. And how at 15, it’s tomorrows and hellos, and how later on, there’s a lot more hard goodbyes. It made me realize how important living every moment is. So be good to yourself, be good to those you love, be good to this world we live in.”

* * *

When he finished, it felt as if we had just heard a Yom Kippur sermon. And we had, and now, you have, too. 😊 It’s a simple yet profound message: We will all die. But it’s the awareness of death that allows us to live fully. Death reminds us that we are given life as a gift. And knowing that it does not last forever means that each day, each moment should not be taken for granted.

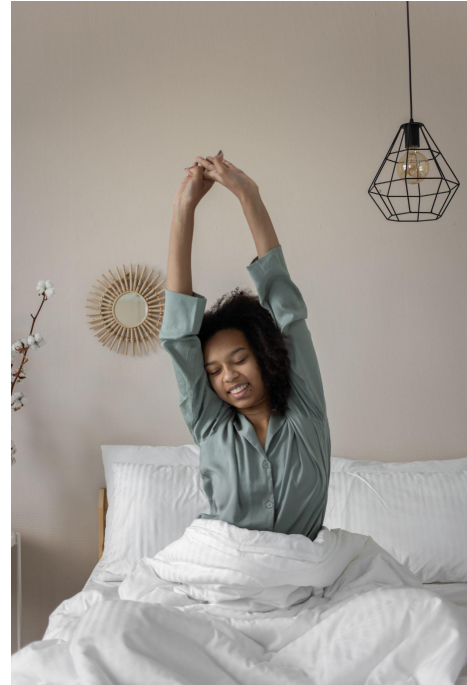
Wake up each day and announce to yourself, others, and God: “*Modeh ani lefaneikha* - I am grateful [...] that You have restored my soul to me,” my awareness - my ability to appreciate this new day.

So, now, What are you going to do with this gift?

What are you going to do with this new day?

What will you do with your life?

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The Torah explains it this way in *Parashat Nitzavim*, which we read just a couple of weeks ago:

העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ... ובחרת בחיים

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

But what exactly does the Torah mean with this command to “choose life?”

In the context of the verses preceding and following this command, choosing life means: “to love Adonai your God, to walk in God’s ways, and to keep God’s commandments [...so] that you may thrive and increase, and that Adonai, your God, may bless you.” (Deuteronomy 30:16) But why does the Torah add death here?

The Torah reminds us that we are all confronted with death. Especially on Yom Kippur, we can hear the train coming towards us, we can see the white-hot light, and we can feel the rumble.

This is not going to last forever.

The clock is ticking.

What do you choose?

The Torah says once you see the light of the train, you see the end, and then you can really understand what it means to live a life of meaning, of purpose, of goodness, of joyfulness. Ibn Ezra, a 12th-century Spanish commentator, explains that to choose life is to choose love. When we are confronted with death, we embrace love, to love ourselves, to love others, and to love the world.



We are to fill the world with life; we scream out: *L'Hayyim!*

While we know that death is coming, we try not to let that knowledge overwhelm us; it can, but today, we are invited to use it as a reminder to live a life of goodness, of love. Over the years, I've sometimes seen that when people are given a terminal diagnosis, they often take a real time-out. They suddenly realize that this is it, and they often shift their focus and fill each moment with goodness. Sometimes, this happens after a car accident, a heart attack, another illness, or an intestinal blockage - a moment where life may be hanging in the balance - a frightening moment.

Suddenly, there is this clarity of thought.

I could have died, so now I know something I have known on a simple level all my life, but now I know it more deeply, more profoundly—every minute counts. I'm going to live my life differently - more meaningfully.

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But we don't have to wait until something happens to us. We can do it today. We don't need to have a heart attack. We are presented with this train of death every year on Yom Kippur. It's our annual rehearsal of our own end. A day without any physical pleasures. We are wrapped in our white burial shrouds.

We looked into our coffin last night at Kol Nidrei when *Sifrei Torah* (the Torah scrolls) were removed, just an empty ark, the ark of the dead. Our liturgy on Yom Kippur reminds us that life is fleeting. The metaphors of the *Unetane Tokef* are chosen carefully from the *Tanakh*, from the Hebrew Bible - to emphasize just how transient life is.

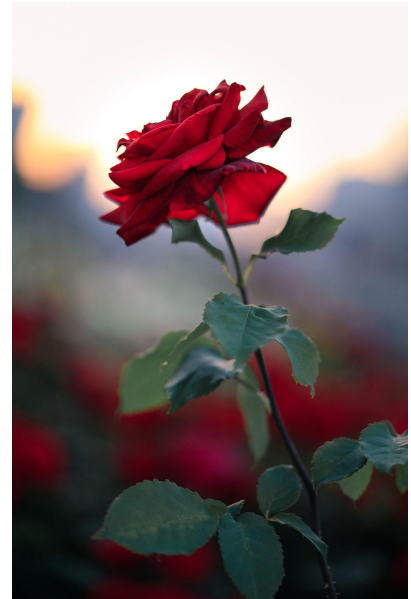


Abraham states that he - a human being is - nothing but “dust and ashes - *afar v'efer.*” (Genesis 18:27) The book of Job states, we are like a “fading cloud - *kalah anan*” (Job 7:9). To Isaiah, we are likened to “withering grass, a fading flower - *yaveish hatzir navel tzitz.*” (Isaiah 40:8)

But these and other images are not recited to torment us or frighten us. Their annual recitation is not morbid. It's transformational. It's reawakening. It's a reminder - don't waste this life. We can change our

choices at any moment. I have utilized Isaiah's image at the start of many funerals, as my dad used to do.

Isaiah explains that each of us is like a flower - there is great beauty to a flower like a rose. But we know the petals will fall; it will die. But perhaps some of its beauty comes from the fact that we know that the rose will not last forever. Its beauty is transient and that's part of its magic.



Unetane Tokef reminds us that while death is before us, life is as well - so use that. "*Ki lo tahpotz b'mot hamet, ki im b'shuvo mi'darko v'hayah!* You, God, do not desire the death [of the sinner], but that we change our ways and live." Death reminds us how to live. Death gives life meaning.

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This teaching is found in popular culture as well. I know I'm a few years behind, but I finally finished the TV show *The Good Place* this year. And spoiler alert - in the final season,



the show demonstrated that if you are in a heaven where there is no death, existence becomes meaningless. If you live forever, who cares what you do today? You can always do it tomorrow. And then you actually do nothing.

So, it's mortality that gives life meaning and urgency. And the awareness of that, *that* can change your life.

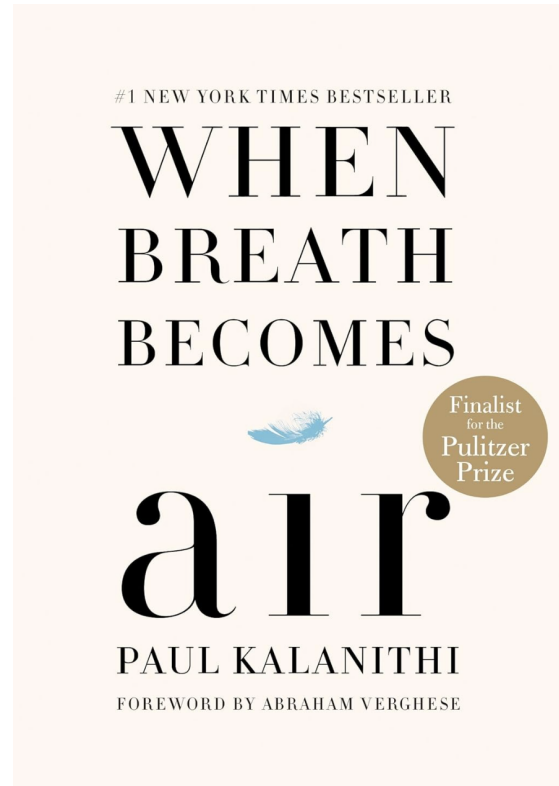
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The book *When Breath Becomes Air* - a must-read by the way - explains this masterfully. Written by Dr. Paul Kalantinihi, the book describes his journey with stage four metastatic lung cancer.

Suddenly confronted with his own death at 36, he writes an ode to life with such wisdom and insight that you cannot put it down - until it ends, like life, and especially his - far too soon. He writes: "Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn't know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn't know when. But now I knew it acutely." Awareness of death gives life purpose. Death gives life meaning.

So try imagining it. Imagine you are dead. What would you have wanted to do? What do you want your epitaph to say? What do you want your obituary to say? Think about it for a moment.

Now, when you have an answer, you can work your way back to this moment. To who you are today. Perhaps you may have many days on this earth or, maybe not that many. But either way, think about how you want to get from the you of today to the you of tomorrow—to the you at your death.



In the mysterious, elusive biblical book of *Kohelet*, the book of Ecclesiastes, we read, “*Tov [...] yom hamavet m’yom hivaldo* - better is the day of death than the day of birth.” (7:1) It’s a strange statement - why would birth and the joy and promise of new life not be better?

Kohelet is teaching that if you have lived a good life - a moral life, a life of kindness, a life of *mitzvot*, a life of joy, then you can look back on your life with a sense of accomplishment. So, our actual day of death can be one of satisfaction from a life well-lived. Far too many times, I hear from those at the end of their lives about regrets, relationships unhealed, and misaligned priorities. I, too, know of these. And we all have some regrets. But today reminds us to do something about it. To repair, renew, and mend those relationships. To cherish our time. To live a life of meaning.

Springsteen closed his sermon with a beautiful, acoustic performance of *Last Man Standing*. I had never heard the song, but I felt its power. His takeaway was to live in this moment. That death can inspire us to live a full life. Bruce shouted a question he’s been asking at shows for decades: “Is anybody alive out there?” Then he added: “If you’re alive, then I’m alive.

In an interview with NPR three years ago, Springsteen explained how he finds hope in death: “It’s just the drinking in of life, you know? Having the experience of having been here. As I’ve gotten older, I appreciate that experience more and more each day. I appreciate each sunrise and sunset.”

