



A LAST LETTER

When I lived in Israel as a rabbinical student, I witnessed the strangest Jewish ritual I had ever seen. As part of a class assignment, another student and I visited the “*Kapparot* Center” in Jerusalem a few days before Yom Kippur. The word “*kapparot*” comes from the same Hebrew root – *Kaf-pey-resh* – as the word “*kippur*,” as in “Yom Kippur.” These words all mean “Atonement.” But although I was familiar with the word *kippur*, and the concept of atonement, what I saw at the *Kapparot* Center was unlike anything I had ever imagined would be a ritual associated with Yom Kippur.

You could smell the *Kapparot* Center from blocks away, an unpleasant odor of chicken manure and blood. When we got to the *Kapparot* Center we saw men in black hats and women in long skirts and covered heads assembled at several stations in the facility. One at a time, each person took a chicken – a rooster for a male and a hen for a female – in his or her right hand. They circled the struggling bird around their head while reciting a Hebrew formula which translates as: “*This is my exchange, this is my substitute, this is my atonement. This (chicken) will go to its death while I will enter and proceed to a good long life and to peace.*” The chicken then met its death by a swift cut to the throat, and was placed head down in a funnel so the blood could drain from its body. Its legs continued to move as the bird died. This sight so shocked my classmate’s seven year old son that he became a vegetarian for some time afterward.

What kind of a Jewish ritual was this? Back in the classroom, our teacher explained that the *Kapparot* ritual reflected the belief that we deserve to die for the sins we’ve committed. However, the chicken will die in our stead (lucky for us, and not so lucky for the chicken).

As our teacher explained, *kapparot* is only one of the many Yom Kippur rituals associated with death. As I describe these rituals, some of them may sound familiar to you; others you may have never heard before.

In the days leading up to Yom Kippur, it is customary to go to the cemetery to visit the graves of loved ones. As Yom Kippur evening falls, fathers give their children a blessing that sounds like the final words a parent might say on his deathbed. Before leaving for synagogue, families light memorial candles for all their loved ones who have died.

Traditionally-observant Ashkenazi men wear a *kittel* to the synagogue on Yom Kippur. A *kittel* is a white garment that also serves as a burial shroud. There are five activities prohibited on Yom Kippur: eating/drinking (counted as one), bathing, wearing leather shoes, rubbing oil or lotion on our skin, and having sex. One of my teachers pointed out that the purpose of these prohibitions is to deny the needs of our living body. He said: “On Yom Kippur, we treat our body like the corpse it will one day become.” This teacher

also said that the sight of the open ark, empty of the Torah scrolls during the recitation of Kol Nidre, should remind us of the plain pine box that will be the final resting place of our bodies.

The words of the Yom Kippur prayers also remind us of our mortality. The Unetaneh Tokef reads: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live and who shall die, who shall see a ripe old age and who shall not...." We recite Yizkor, the memorial prayer for those who have died, and we hear the names read of all those who have died in the past year. All of these rituals are supposed to remind us, over and over, that one day our name will be on that yizkor list; one day the memorial candle will burn for us.

Nowadays we downplay death in our observance of Yom Kippur. We don't consider our bodies as living corpses -- most of us will take a shower in the morning and wear our regular clothes to synagogue. When we saw the empty ark earlier during Kol Nidrei, we probably didn't think of a coffin. I am willing to bet that most of us do not really believe that we deserve to die for the sins we've committed. For the most part, we have omitted the message of Yom Kippur as a day on which we face the stark reality of our inevitable death.

The fact is, though, that in our desire to avoid this unpleasant reality, we may have diminished the power of this sacred day.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating that we bring back *kapparot* and slaughter chickens as part of our spiritual preparation for Yom Kippur. Nor do I think that those who take a shower and eat breakfast on Yom Kippur are "lesser Jews" than those who don't. However, I do think there is profound value in reminding ourselves that our days are numbered. Tonight I will tell you about a way to do this that I discovered accidentally, in a most unlikely place.

This year my Uncle Dan's name will be on the Yizkor list of those who died in the past year. He is the one who unintentionally taught me something important about the purpose of Yom Kippur.

In many ways my uncle Dan was the last person I expected to teach me an important spiritual lesson. He was much younger than my father, which made him the "cool uncle." Uncle Dan was the uncle who knew just how great the Beatles were when our parents didn't have a clue. Dan was always joking around and laughing with us. In fact, that's the last memory I have of him: joking and laughing at a family reunion held in Seattle just over a year ago.

After he died suddenly in February, his wife discovered his last letter. It begins "if you receive this I'm no longer a part of this world, but of a better one."

My father sent me a copy of Dan's last letter. When I read it, I could hear my uncle's voice. His last letter was not without humor, as I would have expected. What did surprise me was the explanation of his religious beliefs. This was surprising because I never thought that he dwelled on such matters. Had I known this while he lived, we would have had another dimension to our relationship.

Most moving are the letter's personal messages of love for his friends and family. He asks that we remember him "as someone who made a few people laugh, maybe a help to people with their financial challenges, maybe having a few people think that I was a fairly nice person. Nothing big." The letter concludes: "I treasure you all. In a small part of your heart, please remember me."

Nobody seems to know when Uncle Dan wrote his last letter. As far as we knew, he didn't know that he was going to die. His death surprised us. Dan was hospitalized for a sudden infection, and he never came home. In other words, Uncle Dan wrote his last letter while he was still healthy.

I was truly moved when I realized that he wrote his last letter while he was still healthy. I could imagine myself writing this kind of letter if I were diagnosed with a terminal illness. But it is hard to imagine doing this without facing my imminent death.

Then it hit me: that's the point. As Yom Kippur reminds us, we are all going to die sometime, and we don't know when. Some of us may only have days to live, while others have decades. Since we do not know the day of our death, we cannot assume that we can write our last letter whenever we get around to it. Unless we want our final words to die with us, we need to write our last letter sooner rather than later.

Once I had that realization, I decided that as part of my spiritual preparation for Yom Kippur, I would write my last letter. In a way it was an experiment. I was curious to see what it would feel like; I wondered if it would have the same power as some of the more traditional Yom Kippur observances like fasting or *kapparot*.

Writing my last letter was not easy. For one thing, I couldn't figure out how to begin. "To Whom It May Concern?" "Dear Sir or Madam?" "To my loved ones?" My Uncle Dan's last letter begins with "Greetings," but that sounds too much like those old letters that told you you've been drafted. Then I realized that the problem wasn't with the salutation. The problem was that I gave too much weight to the words that begin my "last communication."

As Yom Kippur reminds us, we really don't know which words will be our last. Our last words could be angry ones because our kids didn't do their homework, or our spouse didn't take out the garbage. Our last words could be complaints about what so-and-so did to us. Or our last words could be words of gratitude and kindness, expressions of love. Because any of our words may be our last, we should give weight to every single word that passes our lips.

Writing my last letter also taught me how pitifully inadequate words are in expressing the love we feel for our family and our friends. After I struggled and struggled to find the right words to express my love, I ended up writing that I hoped they didn't have to rely on my last letter for assurance that I loved them. Instead, I hoped that they felt my love through my actions, each and every day, while I was alive. Then, as I read the words I wrote, I realized that I have not always lived up to that ideal in my day-to-day interactions. My last letter taught me that I had better try harder.

I also learned that writing a last letter not only forces us to think about the legacy we want to leave; it also keeps us honest. You cannot say: "Please remember me as a kind person" and have it necessarily be so. People are not going to remember us the way we want to be remembered – as kind, loving, giving people – unless our lives reflect those qualities. If we gossip, we'll be remembered as gossipers; if we complain too much, we'll be remembered as complainers. And I don't think that's the way we want to be remembered.

Here is the biggest thing I learned while writing my last letter: A last letter is not about death. It's about how we live our life. It's the same with the "death rituals" of Yom Kippur. These rituals are not really about death. They are about life. Yom Kippur reminds us that life is important because it ends. We need to consider how we should best live each day that we have.

Because a last letter is about life, a last letter is not meant to be written once, and then put away, forgotten, until it is discovered after our death. A last letter is meant to be written whenever we need to think deeply about our lives. A last letter is meant to be read every time we need to be reminded of the people we aspire to be. And most important, the words of a last letter are meant to be spoken while we are alive.

In that spirit, I will close with an excerpt from my last letter – with words that are addressed to you:

To my Temple Israel community: I have always felt privileged to be a member of the Jewish people. My greatest wish as a rabbi has been to awaken others to the richness and meaning in our Jewish heritage, to help others discover the treasure that I discovered many years ago. I have tried to be, as Rabbi Hillel taught, "of the disciples of Aaron: to seek peace and pursue it, to love all people and draw them near to Torah."

I hope that when you needed me, I was there for you. I hope that in some small way I helped you deepen your connection to each other and to our sacred inheritance. If I have failed you in any way, I ask your forgiveness.

I am grateful to the mysterious divine power of the universe that brought me into this complex and beautiful world. I am grateful for the pain I have endured, for the ways in which it has strengthened me. I am grateful for the blessings I received, blessings far beyond what I deserve. I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to make a difference for the good.

"I treasure you all. In a small part of your heart, please remember me."

Rabbi Jennifer Jaech
Temple Israel of Northern Westchester
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