

Joy and Woe:
A Memorial Sermon for the
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There was an eminent professor of philosophy at Columbia University who used to spend his summer vacationing at a ranch in the mountains of Wyoming. Walking by himself one day, the professor wandered too far from the ranch.

After being gone for several hours, a search party was organized. Late in the evening, just as the sun was setting, they found the professor walking on a trail back to the ranch.

“We were very worried about you,” said the search party’s leader. “You see, we were afraid that you were lost.”

And the professor insisted indignantly, “I’ve never been lost a day in my life.”

The ranch hand responded, “Well, around these parts, we say that a person who has never been lost has never been very far.”

And the philosopher continued to ponder these words, concluding that they were expressive of a profound insight. Indeed, one who has never been lost has never been very far.

This Yizkor moment affords us the opportunity to acknowledge that we have traveled a pretty good distance in life; we have come a long way; and, in so doing, we have known loss and we have been lost.

It may well be the case that a person must know loss and be lost before our truest humanity will ever be found. Our lives are a mysterious blend of the happy and the sad. Or, as the poet William Blake puts it in one of my favorite poems:

Man was made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know
Through the world we safely go.
Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.

“It is with sorrows, as with countries,” wrote the French philosopher, “each one has his own.” The beloved names of our dear ones have been lovingly engraved and etched in marble and granite and bronze.

Most of them lived to be rich in both years and experience. Some, however, were cut down in the midst of their vigor and growth. All were precious beyond description and their memories are treasured in humble reverence and everlasting gratitude.

From childhood, we begin to learn that death is an inescapable fact of life. The head assents to the poet’s wisdom:

...all that lives must die,

passing through nature to eternity.

What happens to us after we die? What does our Judaism teach on this inescapable riddle? Well, for several thousand years, we have been taught that the body's death is not the end.

“So,” you're no doubt saying to yourself, “don't stop there!” And yet, when it comes to what actually does happen to us after we die, our Jewish tradition has consistently shied away from dogmatic pronouncements in favor, instead of affording each individual the choice of an answer that they find satisfactory.

The same freedom applies to other imponderables such as the nature of God, or the origins of the universe. Intellectual freedom undergirds these foundational faith questions for the rabbis. We must each decide for ourselves.

On this question of what becomes of us after our death, Jews have believed among these things:

1. All souls go to the underworld, Sheol – an idea referred to in the Torah.
2. The righteous are rewarded in heaven (Gan Eden) and the evildoers punished in Gehenna or hell. Physical resurrection of the body with the Messiah's arrival will lead to Judgment Day.
3. The soul returns to be with God the Creator who gave it.
4. We are reincarnated, gilgul ha-Nefesh, literally “souls rolling to be recycled.” Reincarnation was a popular belief of Jewish mystics (Kabbalists) under the influence of Zoroastrian societies.
5. We live on in our children's and grandchildren's lives and memories.
6. We become part of the universe – at one with all of nature.
7. We live on in the legacy we create from our actions – noble and ignoble – while here on Earth. And...
8. When we are dead, we are dead.

No doubt, there are other positions and combinations of these eight.

Let me share this parable with you. I think it contains a very Jewish message. It's about a rich king who had four wives. The king dearly loved the fourth wife most of all and adorned her with rich robes and the finest of delicacies. She was given only the best.

He also loved his third wife very much, and always showed her off to neighboring kingdoms. However, the king had this nagging fear that some day, she would leave him for another. So, he watched over her with great anxiety and suspicion.

He truly loved his second wife as well. She was his confidant and was always kind, considerate, and patient with him. Whenever the king faced a problem, it was his second wife who was there for him to help him get through the difficult times.

The king's first wife was a very loyal partner and made great and often unseen contributions in maintaining him and his kingdom. However, he did not really love her. Although she loved him deeply, he hardly took notice of her.

And then one day, the king fell ill and he knew his time was short. He thought of his luxurious life and wondered, "I now have four wives with me, but when I die, will I be alone?"

And so, he asked his fourth wife:

I have loved you the most, endowed you with the finest clothing and showered great care over you. Now that I am dying, will you follow me and keep me company?

"No way!" exclaimed the fourth wife and she walked out on the king. Her answer cut like a dagger to his heart.

So the saddened king asked his third wife, "I have loved you all my life. Now that I am dying, will you attend and follow me?"

"No!" replied the third wife. She said, "Life is too good. When you die, I am going to find a new husband and remarry."

The king then asked the second wife:

I have always turned to you for help and you have always been there for me. When I die, will you follow me and keep my company?

She answered,

I'm sorry, but I can't help you this time. It's impossible. But, I will stay with you until the very end and make sure you have a lovely funeral.

The king was devastated. Then a voice called out, "I'll leave with you and follow you no matter where you go."

The king looked up and there was his first wife. She was so emaciated, suffering from malnutrition and neglect. Greatly grieved, the king said: I'm so sorry. I should've taken better care of you when I had the chance."

Here then, is the moral: we all have four wives in our lives, and we need to take good care of each one of them:

The fourth wife is our body. No matter how much time and effort we lavish on making it look good, and keeping it healthy, it will leave us when we die.

The third wife is our possessions, status, and wealth. When we die, it will go to others.

Our second wife is our family and friends. No matter how much they have been there for us, the longest they can stay with us is to the grave. And they remember us after we are gone.

But our first wife is our soul – our meshama, which is so often ignored and neglected in pursuit of wealth, power, and the pleasures of this world. We need to cultivate, strengthen, and cherish the soul, for it is the only company we shall have wherever we go.

Amen