

“TO EVERYONE A SEASON”
Part Five

“BEYOND CLIME AND TIME”
A Sermon for the Memorial Service of Atonement Day 5772
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Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn
Congregation Temple Sinai
New Orleans, Louisiana

We arrive now at this Yizkor service of memorial which is, for many of us, the most poignant and sacred moment of our entire year.

Our minds and hearts penetrate, unfettered by season or distance in years, truly “Beyond Clime and Time,” to embrace and consecrate the memory of our beloved dead. Though we sit beside one another in community, we alone can tell the full story of the depth of our loss and the uniqueness of relationships.

Says W. B. Yeats:

“Man is in love and love’s what vanishes.
What more is there to say?”

Indeed, is this not the stark essence of this moment.

Typically the prayer book will more fulsomely describe our situation, when in a few minutes we shall read:

“One by one our companions, passing along
the road of life, disappear from our view . . .
We strain to see what lies beyond the gate,
but all is darkness to our mortal sight.”

Death remains an enigma; an impenetrable veil through which, though we gaze, we are left only to wonder: What happens? Where do we go? What is it like? Unanswered, there is merit in the act of questioning, so long as the end of our wondering returns us to engage in the challenge and the privilege of living.

I. Between Acceptance and Denial

I came across a wonderful statement this year by the renowned theologian, Harvey Cox. In his latest work, *The Future of Faith*, Dr. Cox reminds us:

“At some point in evolution our forebearers
came to the realization that one day they
would die, and this deepened the mystery.
However advanced other animals might be –

. . . only humans marked the spots where they placed the remains of their dead, . . .”

“Already they were trying to wrench meaning from mystery, and this is what set them apart from the other creatures.”

Dr. Cox goes on to make the case that –

“The awareness of one’s own mortality raises the question of the meaning of life, and this eventually spawned philosophy, religion, and culture.”

Now as I read these words by such a respected scholar, I pictured the libraries all over the world filled with learned tomes of philosophy, religion and culture, which direct our attention to and acceptance of our mortality. But then I also read *The Newsweek* essay by George Lundberg in which he argued that despite all we know about ourselves, compliments of every academic and scientific discipline there is to cite, we **still** wonder whether or not this thing mortality really applies to us.

“Modern lore has it that in England,” writes Lundberg, “death is imminent, in Canada inevitable, and in California optional. Failing hips can be replaced, clinical depression controlled, cataracts removed. . . . But not even a great health-care system can cure death.”

Just this year, a *New Yorker* cartoon, depicted a man frightened out of his wits upon answering his apartment door, to find himself standing face to face before the Grim Reaper, the Reaper’s bony hand extended, holding out a small card.

“Relax’,” the Reaper reassures the shaken man.
“It is only a ‘save the date’ card!”

II. The Protocol of Grief

Well of all the days in the entire year, this Day of Atonement is the one on which our Jewish faith has always underscored the folly of denial and the wisdom of accepting and confronting our own deaths, even as we gather now to grieve and acknowledge the loss of our dear ones and precious friends.

A Christian minister friend of mine mentioned his wish that the Church and Christian theology would do a better job in providing their adherents with a Jewish-like protocol for mourning and for the expression of grief.

When we think about it, we understand his point. Our larger society has forgotten how to mourn. It offers no K'riah ribbon to cut and publicly wear for a week. That black ribbon proclaims, without having to say a word, "I am in grief and this ribbon is but a symbol of how I feel and of my 'torn-to-piecesness'."

Neither secular society nor the teachings of the Church, offer the mourner Shiva services for the week following the funeral, when a minyan of relatives, community and friends gathers and shares one's sorrow and one's memories, one's laughter and one's tears within the intimate and familiar setting of one's own home. Think about it. No Shloshim (the 30 day period of mourning), no unveiling, no Yahrzeit each year at the anniversary of our loss. There are no rituals in the Church the likes of our Judaism's.

Following the unexpected death of her husband Raymond, novelist Joyce Carol Oates sat down to write a book. This one is so different from all others she has written. Oates presents an intimate memoir of her life following her husband's death. She titled it, *A Widow's Story*. Now, it is **not** a great book by any means, except for one quote-worthy statement which is really applicable to each one of you (certainly not just to widows!), but to each one of you whose loss is recent and who have had to negotiate the world alone these past 12 or 18 months.

Listen! Here it is. Says Joyce Carol Oates:

Of the widow's countless death-duties
there is really just one that matters:

On the first anniversary of her husband's death
the widow should think, 'I kept myself alive'!"

Applicable, as I said, to all whose loss is recent.

III. There Are Three Names . . .

The Memorial Book you received on entering the sanctuary records the names of dear ones placed there at the behest of many of you as an act of tender love, respect and longing.

In perusing these many hundreds of names inscribed in this Book of Memorial, and mindful of the thousands whose names have been lovingly engraved upon the permanent Memorial Plaques of our Congregation, we recall now a beloved Jewish teaching.

In the Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Va'yak'hel, we are taught:

“There are three names by which every person is called.
One which his father and mother call him,
and one which people call him,
and one which he earns for himself.
The best of all is the one he earns for himself.”

The magnificent poem by the Israeli poet, Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, known simply to the world before her own death in 1984 as Zelda, brings our thoughts full circle at this poignant hour.

Zelda builds her poem upon that Midrashic teaching, to which I just referred, titling it in Hebrew, “L'chol Ish Yesh Shem – Each of Us Has a Name.” This masterful poet, repeats the opening line in each of the nine short stanzas, but as she does, there

follows two contrasting name-granting sources, elements of growing and experiencing which clearly impact a person's identity. You will see what I mean. Here is her poem:

“Each of us has a name / given by God,
and given by parents.
Each person has a name / given by stature and our smile /
and given by what we wear.
Each of us has a name / given by the mountains /
and given by our walls.
Each of us has a name / given by the stars /
and given by our neighbors.
Each of us has a name / given by our sins
and given by our longing.
Each of us has a name / given by our enemies /
and given by our love.
Each of us has a name / given by our celebrations /
and given by our work.
Each of us has a name / given by the seasons /
and given by our blindness.
Each of us has a name / given by the sea /
and given by our death.”

We will soon be silent as we meditate upon the names of those dear ones who have left us this year and in years past. The poet is right, of course, we are each the sum of many influences, talents, strengths and weaknesses, and experiences – both bitter and sweet. There is not one individual who is identical to another. We are, each of us, unique.

Each of us has a name (writes the poet) /
given by the sea / and given by our death.

In concluding her poem with reference to the sea, she brings to mind an ancient parable about death. It teaches that the horizon as a limit is really not the true end of existence. The horizon is an illusion marking only the extent of our vision.

Zelda speaks to us as if we were standing upon a seashore watching as a great ship sails out to sea. Someone calls out –
“She’s gone!” when the ship’s sail is no longer visible.

“Gone where?” Gone from our sight that is all. The ship’s diminished size is **in my vision**, not **in her majesty!** And just at the moment when someone calls out “She’s gone,” there are other voices, on the other side, ready to welcome her home to port and who take up the gladsome cry – “Here, here she comes, safely home!”

Yes, each of us has a name, and we remember our dear ones now as they uniquely lived according to their destined path.

They now are “Beyond Clime and Time,”
but we see them with the eye of memory,
their faults forgiven, their virtues grown larger.

We remember them with gratitude and can do no other than to bless their precious names.

Amen!