

"THE LAST MITZVAH"

The subject of death is in style these days. Like another subject that used to be taboo, whispered about if discussed at all, although its reality and ubiquitousness were acknowledged, death has now emerged -- in courses on the campus, in best-selling books, in discussion groups and symposia, liberating us from fear and morbidity in talking of this inevitable phenomenon.

A very fine literature has grown up in what is now a new discipline called "thanatology," which identifies, amongst other things, the various stages of death, from denial to acceptance.

Is there a Jewish dimension, a Jewish view on this momentous issue? Yes, there is.

Take the stage of "acceptance." The dying person must accept what? Generally -- its inevitability and its naturalness. And that is only right. Death is a natural phenomenon. But, from a Jewish perspective, that is not quite enough.

The Torah, I believe, teaches us not only how to live, but also how to die. The two are intertwined, and one does not go without the other. Of course, we cannot choose the circumstances of our death. One needs mazzal in dying as well as in living! We find ourselves in given and limited circumstances at the end of life as well as in the course of life. But we are challenged to summon up all our will and spirit and depth and faith in confronting death as well as in confronting life.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to tell the somewhat incredible story of the Kotzker hasid who was on his deathbed, surrounded by his grieving family. He opened his eyes and asked them to bring some spirits and drink Le'chayyim. They looked puzzled, and thought that he had taken leave of his senses. But he explained: whenever a hasid betakes himself to perform God's will, he does so with joy at the opportunity to do a mitzvah. Now, if God wants me to die, and I do so, then I am now performing His will. It therefore is proper that I do so in a happy and joyous spirit!

What does this mean? What is the conceptual and spiritual background of such an attitude?

The great medieval grammarian, R. David Kimhi, taught that the biblical honorific עַבְדֵי יְהוָה (the servant of the Lord), is applied to one who devotes all of his life, even the most physical and corporeal aspects of life, to the service of God. Whoever takes all activities <sup>and</sup> occurrences of his life, no matter how

remote from the spiritual, and focuses them on the goal of doing God's will, such a person is truly a "servant of the Lord."

The great hasidic thinker, Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro (author of "בני יששכר") continues this idea: hence, we must dedicate not only life but death too to the spiritual goal of executing God's will! According to a great Kabbalist (author of "עשרה מאמרים"), Adam, who represents collective man, was given not one but two commandments. The first one is well known: "but of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil thou shalt not eat of it" (Gen. 217). What is not so widely known is that the rest of the verse also constitutes a commandment: <sup>כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות</sup>, "for in the day thou eateth thereof thou shalt surely die." That is not only a prediction, but also a commandment: if you violate the negative, "thou shalt not eat," then you must perform the positive commandment, "thou shalt surely die!" This is not only a fact of nature; it is a divine commandment.

In that case, Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro continues, the Jew must approach death with kavvanah (intention), even as he does in the case of any other positive commandment. It is for this reason, too, that the Torah tells us that <sup>וימת שם משה עבד ה'</sup>, "so Moses the servant of the Lord died there" (Deut. 34:5). Moses was an <sup>עבד ה'</sup> (servant of the Lord), not only in the conduct of his life, but also in the manner of his death: even as he dedicated all his life to God, so did he respond to the summons to die with the same inner participation and dedication.

Thus, he explains the verse in our sidra: <sup>עלה על קר העברים הזה... ומות בהר אשר אתה עולה שם</sup>  
"Get thee up into this mountain of Abarim... and die on the mountain whither thou goeth up" (Deut. 32:49, 50). Note that the Torah does not say <sup>ותמות בהר</sup>, "and you will die on the mount," but <sup>ומות</sup>, "and die." This form is the imperative rather than the future. God does not merely inform Moses that he will die, He commands him.

Death as the last mitzvah! How strange! Does, then, one die of his own free will and at a time of his choosing?

Of course not. <sup>ויוס</sup> But given the circumstances, one can participate in his death spiritually and psychologically! A Moses dies -- as he lived -- in fulfillment of the divine will. He does not just peter out, like a machine running down, but brings all his life's forces to the fulfillment of the divine will to end life. <sup>לא בהתה עינו ולא נס לחה</sup>, "Moses' eye was not dimmed, nor his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7).

Moses did not just fade away; his death was a great spiritual gesture.

Of course, death is inevitable. Despite all the sophisticated but essentially silly talk which we have been hearing about the possibility of achieving immortality through biological engineering, the law of death is universal. Every living thing, from bacteria through cockroaches, from roses through redwood trees, from elephants to men, must die even as they were born, must disintegrate even as they came into being. But life too, and not only death, is given to us without our leave. The Rabbis put it this way: על כרחך אתה חי ועל כרחך אתה מת "perforce you live, perforce you die" (Avot 4:29). The whole point of both life and death is that the natural should not have the last word. In life we are involved in a series of acts of nature: eating and speaking and cohabiting and relating and moving and feeling. Yet Judaism tells us neither to submit to the natural nor deny it, but to elevate it, transform it, convert it into mitzvot. Judaism bids us raise the natural to the sacred, the physical to the metaphysical, and thus sanctify all of life. So it is with death: it is a natural act, but never must we remain at the level of the natural. Here too we must transform it into a mitzvah, and elevate it to the transcendent. For a Jew, the natural act of dying must be raised to the volitional, joining our act of will to the act of inevitable nature; elevating the mechanical to the sacred, and investing it with new significance.

We speak often today, especially in the polemics concerning euthenasia, of "dying with dignity." Unquestionably, that is important. A dignified death is one that is characterized by self-awareness, without debilitating pain, without becoming a burden for others, without vegetating. Some few are lucky enough to attain this. But there are many who are not fortunate enough to achieve this dignity in death -- as there are millions who do not attain dignity in life, but are subject to hunger and pain and humiliation. But Judaism insists that "dignity" in death does not end with that, but includes as well one's intention, one's will, one's spiritual participation, one's joyous acceptance of God's will. It does not mean, of course, that the Jew looks forward to death as a good thing. But when it happens, as with any great occurrence of nature in life, he responds to it with an act of the spirit.

That Kotzker hasid of whom we spoke -- he died with Jewish dignity! True, there are not many who achieve such dignity in death. But then, how many achieve dignity in life?

The Kotzker Rebbe himself, and his rebbe, the Pershiskher, used to tell "of their frequent meetings with the dead who did

not know that they had died, people who lived in an imaginary world, homeless spirits whom even Hell would not admit... They lived in neither this world nor the next. Driven and confused, they roamed about without goal or reason" (A.J. Heschel, A Passion for Truth p. 23). Think of it! They encountered spiritless bodies who bought and sold, attended conferences, read papers... but whose lives had no design, whose busy-ness had no ultimate purpose, whose existence had no unity, who had no value for others and no goals for themselves and no significance for the world -- ghosts, specters, who had convinced themselves and other such phantoms that they were alive, when they were really dead, belonging to neither this world nor the next!

Haven't you ever met such people? I have, and I am sure you have: people walking the street, frequenting the market place, chattering at cocktail parties, concocting deals, greeting you with a perfunctory, "how are you?," and receiving the same innane question in return, never meaning it, never relating, never rising above the dust and grime of life -- people who stopped living a long time ago! Echoes without voices, silhouettes without substance, stories without plots!

Such lifelessness comes from burying one's self in his natural surroundings, and never responding to the summons from above. Lives are empty and void if men do not allow themselves to be liberated, sanctified, invested with significance; if a table is a table and not an altar; if bread is bread, and not an occasion for blessing God; if an idea is an idea, and not an event that evokes wonder at the Creator; if happiness is fun, and not an opportunity for spiritual joy, for the recitation of  
וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֵי שָׁמַיִם .

And so it is with death. If one had spiritually died<sup>a</sup> long time ago, then physical death is as devoid of dignity as one's life was. There are people who live without dignity, and they are dead. And there are people who not only live with dignity, but die with dignity -- and such people deserve the epithet  
עַבְדֵי ה', the servants of the Lord!

The idea that one must prepare for and participate in death as one does for any other positive commandment, enhances life itself. Otherwise, death isn't death, and life isn't life. By confirming the mitzvah of death -- וּמֹת בְּהַר שֵׁנִי "and die on the mount" -- we confirm the mitzvah of life: both evoke kavvanah (intention, participation) and simhah (joy). To die as an act of mitzvah is not the result of a sudden surge of heroism. It requires a lifetime of training, of full and meaningful living. To end life as an act of will, as a spiritual performance, is a sign that one has lived in the same way. In such cases, both

life and death are carried out <sup>בזרה</sup>, "on the mount" --  
on the highest level of which humanity is capable.

This, then, is a Jewish contribution to the new science of thanatology. Acceptance, dignity, require that we do with death what we do with life: by an act of will and inner participation, we convert the natural act to one of mitzvah. Without such an element of will and sanctity and mitzvah, the living are dead. With it, the dead remain alive. Without it, life is morbid; with it -- death is a living experience.

The Rabbis put all of this into one immortal phrase:

רשעים בחייהם נקראים מתים וצדיקים במיתתם נקראים חיים

"The wicked even when they live are called dead, and the righteous in their death are called living."

That is why we were given a Torah: <sup>2</sup> וחי בהם, so that we attain life through it. It is Torah which helps us master life, and remain unvanquished even by death. <sup>כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו</sup>  
for the words of the Torah are our life and the length of our day -- and even beyond it.