

## **Rabbi Bloom's Yom Kippur Yizkor Service Talk October 9, 2019**

To Brad Bloom who encouraged me to write this parable. Ken Fehl

### Dealing with Death

Rod Serling wrote the story "One for the Angels" for his Twilight Zone television show decades ago. It was a story about a pitchman who sees a dark-haired man in a suit whom no one else sees. The stranger introduces himself as Death, and informs the salesman that at midnight he will come to take him away. Death gives him the courtesy of foresight to allow him time to say his good-byes. The man asks Death whether this decree could be delayed. "Only on rare occasions", Death explained, "when a scientist is on the cusp of a major discovery or someone is about to achieve his lifelong personal dream. "I have such a dream" counters the salesman. "I have never made a really great pitch... a pitch for the angels." "OK" responds Death, we can postpone your time until you achieve this dream."

My friend told me that if he had faced the same predicament, he too would have requested from Death a 6-month delay in order to get all of his affairs in order. "No problem" Death quickly replied to my friend. But then my friend realized how easy it was to get this imaginary postponement. At that point in this fantasy scenario he began to think about his father who died at age 57 of an embolism following a gallbladder operation. "If you can so readily agree to my request for an extension," Ken asked Death, "then why did you take my father at 57 when I was only 27?"

Death, it seems was annoyed, exclaiming, "How dare you question me? I in fact did give your father an extension." After he had been rounded up with his father on Kristallnacht in Vienna on November 9, 1938, he was confined to his former high school, which had been transformed into a prisoner-holding compound. After two weeks of confinement, he was lined up with all of the other detainees, marched in front of the SS Officer in charge who selected "left" or "right": left taking you to the Dachau concentration camp, and right taking you through the exit onto the street and relative freedom. "I was there" Death shouted to the lad, "and I allowed your father to exit right into freedom instead of left towards death."

"And furthermore I gave him a second extension when your father immigrated to America and served in the US Army in World War II. Had he traveled with his division into battle, he would not have survived. Since each troop of ten soldiers was allowed to select one person to be excused from the division, it was I who had them vote your father out of their corp that day and he survived the war. So how dare you question my generosity. You only asked for 6 months. Your father should have died twice before his embolism — and I extended his time by over 40 years — so that he could raise a family," pointing his finger at the chest of the young man in his imaginary story.

My friend humbly apologized to Death, and from that time forward he no longer grieved about his father's early demise at 57, but appreciated mightily his two earlier escapes which allowed him a full and rewarding life.

Humankind has long been, like my friend Ken, debating and reflecting on human mortality, going back to ancient times. Even Ecclesiastes said, "No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it" (Ecclesiastes 8:8).

At Yizkor we remember the past and the lives of those we sorely miss. Their longevity arises in our minds and we ponder 'if only our loved ones had had more years.' But we quickly realize these thoughts about negotiating with Death are fantasies. My friend came to grips by rethinking the history of his father's life, including his near death experiences in World War Two and earlier on as a teenage temporary prisoner of the Nazis in Vienna.

At the end of the day, many of us who have lost loved ones at a relatively young age feel the pain of their absence as if God had robbed them and us of years that should have been allotted to them.

Again, we do not understand why things happen the way they do, with the years given to human beings. One person dies in childhood. Another lives over a hundred years. Why? Job said to God, "Who is this God who hides counsel without knowledge? So I have said I do not understand (God's ways). This is far above me" (42).

We cannot comprehend why people receive the length of years they do. That is what yizkor is for, which is to find that balm of comfort that softens the hurtful memories of lives we wanted to live longer. How do we turn that frustration into gratitude for what we had, as compared to what we thought they and we deserved?

"Blessed are those who find wisdom who gain understanding." (Prove 3:13). Ken found that understanding in his own way. This is our task: We cannot change the ways of God. We can only change the ways we react to death and how we understand ourselves in the face of human mortality. May the words of this Yizkor service bring us the strength and consolation we need to heal us and bring us added consolation at this hour.