

---

We live in an age of ever-increasing knowledge. With a couple of clicks you can find out just about anything. What is the weather in Kathmandu? Who invented duct tape? You can Google Quantum Physics or find out how to make 27 different kinds of pesto.

Yet there are certain things that have always eluded us, and always will. There is a passage in the Talmud which lists 7 matters that are hidden from humanity, *Shivah d'varim mechusim mi-bnei adam*.<sup>1</sup> 15 hundred years and all this knowledge later, they're still just as mysterious. The first two are *Yom Hamittah*, the day of one's death, and *Yom HaNechama*, the day of consolation.<sup>2</sup>

The first is a truism, of course, but it bears repeating: We don't know when we are going to die. We don't know when our loved ones will die. We have all heard of tragic accidents or untimely illnesses claiming the lives of previously healthy, robust people. And we have also heard of people who outlive a dire prognosis, walk away from accidents, beat the odds. Our sages taught "Repent one day before your death," with the full understanding of what it means.

The second uncertainty is *Yom Ha-Nechamah*, the Day of Consolation. When we mourn, the questions can torment us: Will it ever stop hurting? Will I ever feel normal again? Since the Jewish tradition sets up a series of landmarks for mourners – a week of shiva, a month for shloshim, a year for yahrzeit -we might assume that as we reach each of these milestones, we should feel better. Sometimes we do, but often we don't.

Moses Maimonides, who lived at the end of the 12th century, was one of our greatest scholars. He was a brilliant rabbi, philosopher, and physician. He wrote many books, including one on laws of mourning. If anyone should be an expert, he should. When he was about 30, he lost his brother to a shipwreck. This is how he described his own grief:

*The greatest misfortune that has befallen me was the drowning of my brother. On the day I received that terrible news I fell ill and was almost given up. Time has passed, but I am still mourning. How should I console myself? Whenever I see his handwriting on one of his letters, my heart turns upside down and my grief awakens again.*<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, *Yom Ha-Nechamah*, the Day of Consolation, is not a fixed date on anyone's calendar.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pesachim 54b

<sup>2</sup> Inspiration for this sermon comes from [Rabbi Carl Paskins, Yom Kippur 5761](#)

<sup>3</sup> Y. Sheilat, Iggerot ha-Rambam Volume I, Jerusalem: 1987

The Talmud describes these mysteries – Yom HaMittah and Yom haNechama – as hidden *from humanity*. They are God's domain. In the Amidah, God is called *meimit u'mikhayeh*, Giver of death and of life. When we greet a mourner, we are supposed to say, "*HaMakom yinachem etchem...* May God console you," for we are taught that God is the ultimate source of consolation.

In Parashat Nitzavim, just after the section you heard this morning, we read, *ha-nistarot la-Adonai*. The mysteries belong to God.<sup>4</sup> God, of course, is the greatest mystery of all. Given that, how do we cope with these hidden truths, these natural unknowns of life?

The answer is all around us. It is the reason we are here, in this Sanctuary, gathered together for Yizkor. Just a few verses after *HaNistarot L'adonai*, the Torah says, - and you just heard - "*Lo bashamayim hi...*"It's not in the heavens...nor is it beyond the sea... No, it is very close to you."<sup>5</sup>

The answer is very close to you. Sitting right next to you, in fact, or down the row, or across the room. As Jews, we face the uncertain future by facing each other, Panim el Panim. We cannot see God's face, but we can, and must, turn to each other, see each other, connect with each other.

Tending to the dead and consoling the mourner are considered among the greatest of all mitzvot, and they both take place in community. Being part of a community can bring a degree of certainty even to *Yom HaMitta* and *Yom HaNechama*. We still cannot know when anyone will die, but we can know that when it happens, we will not be alone. We still cannot know when we will feel better, but we can know that there will be people there to help.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a classic psychology experiment in which a researcher was trying to determine how long someone could keep his foot in a bucket of ice water under different conditions. The experiment showed that when there was another person in the room, the subject could keep his foot in the bucket twice as long.<sup>6</sup> ("From this," Rabbi Kushner says "you get a PhD?") There is an old Hebrew expression that describes this phenomenon, and even gets the arithmetic right: *tsarat rabim hatzi nechama*, loosely translated, "Troubles shared are troubles halved."

---

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 29:28

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 30:12

<sup>6</sup> Harold Kushner, *The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of The Twenty-third Psalm*, Anchor/Random House, 2003

---

This is why a minyan is required to say Mourner's Kaddish. Recited in the traditional the Kaddish is a responsive text. A litany of praises, the prayer forces the mourner to assert, however tentatively, faith in life, goodness and peace. It is then the role of the community to acknowledge and affirm this assertion by responding again and again: Amen.

In the Talmud there is a discussion about when the morning begins after the dark of night. After a number of responses, the last sage says: when we see a friend.<sup>7</sup> Emil Durkheim wrote that the primary purpose of religion is not to put people in touch with God, but to put them in touch with one another.<sup>8</sup> I would take it one step further. Only when people are in touch with one another, can they come to sense the presence of God.

Rabbi Gerald Wolpe was just a boy when his father died. Every morning he got up at 5:30 to say Kaddish at the synagogue before going to school. One morning, during the second week, a man appeared at his front door just as he left his house. Gerald recognized him as Mr. Einstein from the morning minyan. Mr. Einstein explained, "Your home is on my way to the synagogue. I thought it might be nice to have some company. That way, I don't have to walk alone."

Each morning, he was there. Mr. Einstein held young Gerald's hand as they crossed busy intersections, as they trekked through snow, rain, sunshine, through all the seasons of his year of mourning. Years later, Rabbi Wolpe came back to his hometown with his wife and baby, and called Mr. Einstein, who invited them to visit. Rabbi Wolpe describes what happened next:

*I drove in tears as I realized what [Mr. Einstein] had done. My home was not on the path to the synagogue; it was completely out of his way. He had walked for an hour to my house so that I would not have to be alone each morning. He took a frightened child by the hand and led him with confidence and faith back into life. [Ever since then, wherever I have gone], Mr. Einstein has been holding my hand.<sup>9</sup>*

One day we will die. One day we will lose a loved one. We don't know when it will be. Living *Panim el Panim*, connected to others, enables us to bear these terrible uncertainties. We can never know what sadness we will have to endure, or how long we will grieve, but knowing someone will be there to help eases the burden. I hope that those of you here who have lost dear ones recently or even not that recently, have indeed found comfort in the presence of community. If you have not, it is not too late to reach out. We will be there for you.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Talmud teaches that the morning begins when we can see the face of a friend. (Berachot 9b).

<sup>8</sup> Emil Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912)

<sup>9</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/a-walking-companion/>

God showed us a great love by creating us in the divine image, and an even greater love by letting us know it. While we will never know God's secrets, we can imitate God and bring light to the darkness. In that light we can see the face of a friend and at the very least, hasten the day of consolation.