

A Bite of the Apple

Yom Kippur Yizkor Sermon delivered 10/8/2011

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It's quite something when the world learns of your death primarily through devices that you invented, and that's what happened Wednesday night. Steve Jobs, one of the founders of Apple, and the innovator and implementer of so many ideas and technologies that power our connected world, passed away, or as one wag put it, was saved to the cloud.

Steve Jobs led a remarkable life of just 56 years. Adopted by impoverished parents, he dropped out of college, and went from tinkering in a garage to being the head of one of the largest companies in the world, and one of its best known business leaders. He single-handedly initiated some of the most important trends in our modern society. From the earliest personal computers in the 70's and 80's to the Macintosh computer in the 90's to iPods and iPhones in the last decade, to iPads and tablets, in this. I figured out that I've owned at least 10 apple computers. Based on the reports of what people have been doing in the hallways during services, pretty much every family in the congregation owns a device of his design.

He changed other realms as well. He brought about electronic sales of music, and was a leading force behind Pixar, which revolutionized movies. He was known for being a perfectionist, for caring about design and details of the user experience, for being demanding of himself and those around him. He was fired from being head of his own company, and then rehired and took it to greater success.

In 2004 he was diagnosed with, and thought he had beaten, pancreatic cancer. In a graduation speech at Stanford in 2005,¹ which is probably being quoted by dozens of rabbis this yizkor, he cited a favorite aphorism : "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right." He continued "It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something."

And he lived those words. Even after his illness returned, he continued to work doing what he loved, in the way that he loved doing it, almost until the very last. Most of his most impressive accomplishments came at a point where he could have very easily retreated to lick his wounds and bathe in his giant piles of money.

As we approach the Yizkor service, we think about those who have passed on.

¹ (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLC>)

We are thinking about what their lives mean to us, whether they were long or short. In doing so, we are also forced to reflect on our own mortality- what makes our lives meaningful? Does the brevity and fragility of life make it more or less worth living?

So, let me ask you a depressing question, inspired by Steve Jobs. What if you knew that today was going to be your last Yom Kippur? What if you knew that today was going to be your last day ever? Would you do anything differently? Would you pray all the more fervently, knowing that as the gates of Neilah closed, you would be on the other side and that you wanted to be as prepared as possible? Would you turn to the practicalities of this world- checking in with accountants and attorneys? Or would you drop your mahzor, grab your bucket list, and run for the exits, lamenting a lifelong list of undone "could have" pleasures and experiences. Would you maintain your last hours in fasting and prayer, or would you go seek a "gourmandish" last meal of treats never to be enjoyed again? Would we live differently, if we really contemplated the possibility that this year, even this day might be our last?

Consider your answer- perhaps you fall into one of the following categories:

Our popular culture is full of descriptions of characters who know they have a short time left, and vow to make every moment count by ensuring that they have not missed any of life's pleasures. Take, for example the "Bucket List," with venerable Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. Or "The Last Holiday"- with Alec Guinness, which I suppose became the 2nd-to-last holiday, when it was remade with Queen Latifah. Drama series, like "Breaking Bad" and "The Big C"- of course, a TV series where the main character is terminally ill requires some careful writing if the network wants to renew. We even have a fascination with the "last meal" consumed by condemned prisoners. There was an uproar when the state of Texas did away with the practice of doing so, after one prisoner ordered a lavish meal and didn't eat it. Apparently the in great state of Texas, if you commit a heinous racially motivated murder, sure you get executed, but that's no cause for concern. But if you don't clean your plate, that's an outrage.

In real life, my observation is that that is rarely how it goes. Some who have a short time withdraw into a tight circle of immediate friends and family. I read an account of how Jobs measured out his last days. A control freak to the end, he kept a tight reign on who could visit, or where they would eat. Life is too short for bad sushi.

Some simply do not accept death, and deny until the last moments. Others are paralyzed or depressed by the knowledge that death is close at hand, or perhaps are jealous and angry of those who will live on.

Some turn to practical matters- consulting with accountants and attorneys, making sure that all of the T's are crossed, the I's dotted, the trusts established. I

know of more than one woman who made sure she died with a full freezer. You've all heard the story of the man who is at his deathbed, calls out each member of the family- asking if they are present. "Are my sons here?" They reassure him that they are. "What about my wife?" "Yes, she's here." "My beloved nephews?" "Yes." He bolts up in bed "then wait, who's minding the store?" What these people are really hoping to do is deny their death by ensuring that life continues as unchanged as possible in their absence.

The Talmud offers another view. It's one of my favorite teachings, Pirkei Avot chapter 2. Rabbi Eliezer offers the following advice: "Repent one day before your death." It's a brilliant idea, really. You can live a totally sinful life, just make sure you get things straightened out (find Moses, if you will) before you go. It kind of makes sense, in a way. As you get older, you are more likely to repent, and have less energy for the most interesting kinds of sin anyway. It's only as you are concerned that you are going to meet your Maker that you begin to worry about what kind of impression you are going to make on Him.

Think about Rabbi Eliezer's statement- can a single day of atonement and reflection really make up for a lifetime of profligate and sinful behavior? For that matter, can a single day, like Yom Kippur, make up for all the wrongs that we have done even in a single year?

A story to illustrate: A patient, while recovering in the hospital from a heart attack, was greeted by an over-zealous rabbi. The rabbi sermonized for half hour on how thankful he should be to have been spared, and how he should repent at once, and then the rabbi asked if all of his sins had flashed before his eyes during the attack. The patient responded, "Don't be ridiculous, the attack only lasted 6 hours."

That's not the end of Rabbi Eliezer's teaching. Elsewhere in the Talmud, Shabbat 153b, his students ask him about this great advice. "But rabbi," they ask, "how can a man know the day of his death?" He responded, anticipating Jobs' aphorism. "Repent today, lest you die tomorrow, and thus spend all of your days in repentance." Live each day as if it might be your last, and you'll have no regrets.

Of course, most of us will never know the day of our death. Perhaps it will be an unanticipated, sudden, heart-stopping moment, or else the final stumble in an agonizing, foggy slog. The truth is, we try not to think about death. It's kind of a downer. In fact, we prefer to live in blissful ignorance of our impending doom. Some have suggested that in fact the only reason civilization exists at all is because we seek to ignore or thwart our impending doom. Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist, wrote a Pulitzer-prize winning book called the Denial of Death, in which he proposed that the reason why we do everything important is to pretend that death won't touch us. That idea motivated the Pharaohs who built their pyramids, the cathedrals of medieval Europe, and those religious groups that

offer very elaborate depictions of the afterlife. The promise of winged angels strumming harps, or eager virgins, or what have you, is basically a way of saying “don’t worry- yes you’re going to die, but not really; things will continue even better than before.” It’s not just religion- also people who create art and write books. There is an infinitude of ways we seek immortality. The only one which does not work is the one proposed by Woody Allen, who said “I’d like to attain immortality by not dying.” Ironically, Becker himself died at a relatively young age, of cancer, before his book was completed, and it was published posthumously.

If human life is indeed short, and limited, does that mean that it means less? Why bother living if we are going to die tomorrow? Why bother doing anything? Think of the millennialists who calculated that the world was coming to an end last May. They sold all their earthly possessions, cleaned out the kids’ college fund to take out billboards, thoughtfully enough, to warn the rest of us. I read a story about how their children responded. Some of them, surprisingly, had a problem with this. The conversation around the dinner table went something like this “If the world is ending Thursday, why should I study for my chemistry test, why should I clean my room?”

Why do anything if there is no tomorrow, or no next year? Morris has come back from the doctor with terrible news- he has just 24 hours left. His wife, Sadie says "that's horrible, what can I do for you?" Morris replies, a bit shyly "I would like to, you know, be with you one last time." She agrees, and it is a poignant shared moment. When they are done, Morris leans over to her, and says in yiddish, "noch a mol" (again). Sadie replies "you know, that's easy for you to say, you don't have to get up in the morning!"

But examine, for the moment, the converse. What if we **were** immortal? Would that be a good thing? It’s the stuff of science fiction. An episode of the Twilight Zone depicts a world with no death, where the agonies of illness, injury, and senility drag on for eternity. This summer, the latest season of one of my favorite series, called Torchwood, took as its premise was that immortality was a curse. The world economy depends on people being born and dying at regular intervals. In a world in which nobody retires, no-one can be promoted. In a world where nobody stops collecting their pension, the economy is doomed for collapse.

Our Jewish tradition sees both the beginning and the end of human history as times when death is suspended. It speaks of a messianic age in which death is truly defeated, but that is a supernatural world, where there is no illness or suffering, where there is no hunger or illness but also no birth or creativity. Everything to do has been “done.” Eternal life is beautiful, but without change or growth.

The same is true of the beginning of history. Look at the story of the Garden of Eden. Some commentators suggest that Adam and Eve were supposed to live

forever, until they ate from the tree of knowledge, and only at that point were they denied the fruit of the tree of life. That bite of apple makes a huge difference. They are consigned to a mortal existence at exactly the same time that they become able to engage in creative and procreative acts- making clothing, and conceiving children. Only a man limited by mortality is able to change himself and the world.

A more practical issue: as human beings, we are driven by deadlines, by limitations of time and resources. When Disney sells the DVD of a classic movie, they only do it for a few weeks. If I could buy it anytime, why should I rush to do it now? If it's hard to get, then I want it. Think of the lines at the Apple stores every time a new gadget comes out. I want what I can't have.

There's a wonderful folk saying- the evil influence does not need to tempt with sins of the flesh, with lurid visions. All it needs to do is whisper in our ear "don't worry, you've got plenty of time." Something that we have in infinite quantity can have only infinitesimal value. Life is meaningful, valuable, precisely because it is short, precisely because it is fragile. Something that reminds us we are going to die can actually be very spiritually uplifting.

The Romans called such a reminder of death a Memento Mori. In Latin, that means, "Remember you will die" – Roman generals would have a slave who followed them around telling them those words. In the medieval period, people would commission art which included images of skulls, or portraits of those who had passed on. They believed that they would behave more ethically if reminded of the end. Mortality reinforces our morality

Yom Kippur, among its many other meanings, is our memento mori. In ancient times, it was truly a moment of life and death. The core rite of the day revolved around two goats. One was offered as a sacrifice, the other sent off into the wilderness. What greater reminder of the fickleness of human mortality? It was a day fraught with peril for the high priest as well. He would only go into the holy of holies on that one day of the year, and the Talmud tells us that some high priests, unworthy of the position, did not emerge alive. The priestly vestments had bells on them so that they could hear if the high priest was still moving, and in fact, they would tie a belt around his waist in case God decided his service was not worthy and he was smitten on the spot.

Of course our experience of Yom Kippur is not nearly as dramatic or risky, but nevertheless, our liturgy forces us to confront death. We recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, which lists all of the grisly ways that we might "kick the bucket" in the coming year- stoning, sword, burning, strangulation, wild beast. A little later, we will offer the haunting Eleh Ezkerah, reminding ourselves of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, gave their lives as martyrs. We are reminded of death in non-verbal ways as well. On Yom Kippur, we actually act out our own death- we refrain from all earthly activities- from eating and drinking, from marital relations.

The white kittle is reminiscent of the shrouds worn by the deceased. If the room were any colder or quieter, the image would be complete. In that atmosphere, in which death seems all the more real, our mortality reinforces our morality. And of course, in just a few minutes, we will recite the sacred Yizkor service, in hopes that their deeds will inspire our own. The reminder that so many dear to us have passed is an essential theme of the day.

The stakes are higher, not lower, when we know the game is short. We decide things differently when we are aware of our mortality. Three psychologists proved it.² They tested court judges. Half the judges were reminded of their mortality through a personality survey, and half were not. They were then all asked to set bond on a hypothetical case similar to the ones they saw in court. The judges who had first been reminded of their mortality set a bond nine times higher than those who hadn't.

When life is short, we can't leave unfinished business with those who matter to us. You are less likely to go to bed mad if you don't know whether you are going to wake up. A favorite story: Esther and her sister Becky have been "on the outs" for years. Becky has been hospitalized, and Esther walks into the room. Becky says "You should just know, don't think that coming here automatically changes anything between us. Nevertheless, I want you to know that if I die, you're forgiven for all you've done to me. But, if I get well, please God, then we're still in a fight."

On the 10th anniversary of 9/11, I re-read some of the accounts of the last phone calls, phone messages, text messages, and emails, sent by those who had awakened that morning not knowing it would be their last. They were messages of love, messages of caring, oddly enough, messages of hope. If the next phone call, the next email, the next text, the next conversation, is meant to be your last, how might it be different?

Often at a funeral we recount the wonderful attributes of those who have passed on. We share how much we loved the deceased, and we tell their stories, inspiring, funny, sad and touching. Why wait until then to offer praise, to share how much we love and admire those around us?

In just a few moments, we are going to recite the sacred Yizkor service. We will remember those with whom we have had our last conversation. We remember those who had their last Yom Kippur, their last day. We will remember their stories. We will remember how their lives mean so much to us. We remember the way that they changed the world, changed **our** world. We carry their spiritual essence with us, as our Memento Mori. Will they inspire us to value life? Will their memory make us make each moment matter?

² http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/opinion/sunday/torchwood-gives-glimpse-of-eternal-life.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=Pyszczynski&st=cse

When life is short, it really does matter that we leave a legacy. It is precisely because we must leave this world, that we must leave this world better than we found it. Yom Kippur is a Memento Mori- it reminds us of our mortality so that we may grasp more firmly to our morality. But Yom Kippur comes but once a year. Yizkor comes but four times a year. If you need some help during the course of the day, think about an apple with a bite taken out of it. You probably see objects with that insignia every day. For just a short moment, that logo might remind you of a person who was successful in changing the world despite a very short life. For perhaps another moment, that logo might lead you to remember that with the first bite out of that very first apple, we traded the ability to live forever for the ability to live meaningfully, that might lead you to think about how you will use that time wisely.

So, what would you do if you knew that this was going to be your last Yom Kippur? Would you allocate your time differently? Would you make sure that you spent quality time with those whom you cared about? Would you choose different projects? Different forms of entertainment? Would you try to be a better person- let your mortality inform your morality? Would you act out your faith differently? Would you leave the world different than you found it?

I hope that each of us here is blessed with this year, and many new years to come, of health, of success. Use this year, use those years, wisely. Make a difference. Hold on to your life, hold on to your mementos of those who passed. Hold on to your Memento Mori. Remember, Yizkor.