

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Reflections on Mortality

This essay is offered for a refuah shelama for Margolit Masha Bat Tova Gittle

STOP

THINK

What if someone were to tell you that you had a fatal illness and had only a few months of decent health left, with pain? What if you knew that the amount of time you had left to function in what we consider to be a "normal" range is very limited?

What would you fill your time with? I imagine you would fill your time with the things that you value the most, that bring you the most enjoyment, meaning, and sense of purpose. Arguably, it is doubtful that you would run to do things that would shorten the amount of time you have, like drinking, extreme sports, or criminal acts. For many people who believe in a higher power, the time left would be filled with what the person feels will provide them with eternity. Earning eternity.

Let's call the motivation that we have regarding the remainder of our lifetime a desire to increase the amount of love we feel in our lives and to cherish the time that has been given to us and use it wisely, to connect to something in us that is eternal. We are told that when the Angel of Death takes us, it is like removing a hair from a glass of milk. Our physical beings encase our souls here on this earth for a short period of time and then, like a garlic peel taken off the garlic, our bodies are buried and the fruit continues in a different frame of reference. By connecting here, we have something forever.

Picture one person standing next to their grave. Picture a second with a different set of values. And yet a third. Ask each, what do your values dictate to you to do in order that when you jump in and get covered your eternal part will continue to have an existence? For a Jew, it is charity, kindness, honoring parents, visiting the sick, and 613 mitzvahs of the Torah. For the Greeks of old, as we approach Chanukah, it would have been pleasure, stoicism, intellectual pursuits. Throughout human history, we Jews have suffered pogroms, extermination and more. If the perpetrators of these crimes against us were standing next to their grave, would they say, just keep on killing Jews, then I can get my eternal reward? If that were true, Hitler and Stalin and many more would be in the highest heavens. I tend to doubt it. Truly. Which one of our bodies does not end up in the grave? Our physical selves are limited in time and purpose. They are like the shell on a seed – plant the seed in the ground and the shell disintegrates and out comes a plant. Or like the peel of the banana. What is inside? Is the fruit brown and mushy and unpleasant or is it just ripe enough to enjoy? This is what our deeds are – are we bringing brown, mushy, unpleasantness to the world or are we a benefit that brings joy?

Do you believe that our lives are in the hands of the Creator? I do. Do you feel good about yourself when you do a good deed, treat others kindly, give forgiveness, and settle disputes? I do. I didn't always feel that way, but as I grew up, I realized the great pleasure there is in connecting to the Creator, in emulating His kindness and generosity wherever I could manage it. It was not natural to do that. Circumstances in my life had to show it to me. But I got it, I understood it. Taking is no comparison to giving. Why? Because when we give, we tether ourselves to eternity. There is a relationship that we can develop with the Creator that brings the greatest joy there is on this earth. If you have not experienced it, it is time to seek it out. NOW. Before we stand any nearer to the grave.

If our lives are in the hands of our Creator AND the conduct which produces the greatest pleasures in living are when we emulate the Creator (as we are instructed and commanded), why then, at times of loss and desperation, do we ever try to rely on man's intelligence alone to defend our lives and our lifestyles? When

we need to listen to the Creator's commandments and instructions the most, our physical selves override our sensibilities and our lower instincts surface. As intelligent people, it does not make sense to do this, to act out our lowest instincts of hatred, jealousy, greed or desire for power or respect. Yet this is human nature, our physical messages outblast our spiritual sensibilities. I would suggest that this is akin to a terminally ill patient shortening the amount of time he has with drinking, extreme sports, or criminal acts. If we remember where we are all going, where every person who ever lived has gone to, we wake up to a different reality, a search for eternity and connection.

At the poignant time when we individually realize that we will all eventually have to give our souls back, the souls that animate the physical bodies in which we travel through this world, do we realize that our intelligence and our abilities to traverse this planet have come from a part of us that is eternal and connected to eternity? As our physical capacities slip away from us, and we become just the flesh and the consequences of physical forces working on our bodies like a person in a coma, we must recognize that we have been privileged to have a knowledge, a daas, which is given to us by the Creator each and every day we have strength in order that, through the hands and feet that He gives us, we can bring His Middos into the world, His Characteristics, of love, kindness, patience, forgiveness, and more. Yet so often, we use that very intelligence to deny His existence, to judge others harshly, to do harm or take more than we are allotted or to do other destructive actions. Chutzpah! With the very intelligence He bestows upon us, because we have free will, we are blinded and can even deny His existence! Amazing world.

The inner experience of our lives is what is precious about a person, the choices we make regarding how we use the gifts the Creator has given us, for as long as He gives them to us. It does not last forever. There is no one alive today that was alive 150 years ago.

A person who uses his intelligence, love and creativity can become someone in this world - a Gadol or if not in learning, a big force in the business or professional world, and yes, this too can be precious to a person. We try to be who we are until we can't anymore. So, if we live because the Creator sends us knowledge, and we conduct ourselves and protect and develop ourselves with the love and talent that the Creator gives us, why on earth when it comes to defending ourselves do we rely on our own hand and not continue to pursue means that the Creator would suggest?

For example, when mankind has disputes, we resort to courts, which the Creator has instructed us to do, but then people might resort to other, lower tactics stemming from revenge, which could even lead to taking the life of another, as is often the case in domestic disputes. When countries have disputes, we use politics, but as we see in the current times, people are resorting to dramatic tactics to influence the emotions involved with the politics, which has led to war and much injury and death. When we deviate from the Creator's instructions and turn to our own instincts and ideas, what are we really doing? We must be true to the same parts that give us pride, purpose and pleasure in living even when there are disputes. We must recognize that all of mankind is ONE. We, mankind, are all connected through the Creator. What has meaning to all of us is OUR connection to what the Creator sends to us - our very lives. And likewise with every living person. When we need Him the most, we must turn to Him and NOT to our own man-made ideas that stem from our physical side. Yes, our politics are influenced by emotions, but our emotions stem from our thoughts and our thoughts are hooked into fear of losses, and it is loss that makes us forget that there is only One Creator and mankind is ONE. When we think there is more than One, we go astray and, instead of emulating His Kindness, Love, and Mercy we cannot help but emulate our own anger, self-interest and limited misconceptions.

He shares His intelligence with us every day. We are able to give love to our family and friends because we are created in His image, which is loving. When we need to protect the very lives that He has given us from those who would do us harm, we need trust in Him and His assistance in defeating those who rise up to kill us. Did the Creator not drown the Egyptians in the Red Sea? We need to stop, think, pray and emulate Him, Who loves every person, every creature, Who provides life and sustenance and good to every living thing for as long as it is His Will. We need to stop taking on the role of being the one to bring justice. We cannot. We don't know what we are doing. We can't. We are too caught up in our own self-interest. We are losing what we value the most - the quiet enjoyment of our lives, doing acts of kindness, developing our talents and creativities to improve the world. Many of us are seeing in the world today a decline of energy toward constructive altruistic goals and an increase in goals that are selfish for a particular ideology or belief system. Mankind can be ONE only when we live at peace with every belief system, seeing that behind each face is a connection to the Creator Who loves every being. Each person is a piece of the puzzle. We fit in. Every one of us. Every person receiving life from the Creator is a puzzle piece too and this is crucial to mankind becoming what the Creator intended. Stand next to the grave and look in. What does the Creator truly want us to do to earn eternity? It does not make sense to me at all that the answer would ever be go out and kill someone I hate or who is my political enemy. I am not saying to rely on miracles when there

are real forces of evil out there. What I am saying is that the world is getting to the point where every person must be seeing that what we are doing is leading nowhere, and that the human race will quickly come to a point where there is no enjoyment or goodness to live for. This only will work if every single living person buys into it. That means EVERYONE. No exceptions. I realize that is unlikely by our own free will. But it is possible. Just give your objections the grave test and be honest with yourself, for you are made in His Divine Image.

I beseech every living person:

STOP. Be who you are. Believe what you like. But think and know that it is YOUR puzzle piece and it does not entitle you to disrespect or harm another puzzle piece. Even if that other person is, in your opinion, totally wrong. He is still a puzzle piece placed there by the One Creator who will bring that person to justice in the best way for that person. It is not the job of man but the job of The Creator to rectify every soul, either in this world or the next.

Behind every face is the Creator. Respect every person. Live peaceably. Another person need not be a threat to anyone. Forego idols and ideology that can't be true – give it the stand next to the grave test. Be honest. If I only earn another million, I will earn eternity? Hardly.

The most passionate of us are simply trying to tell the world about the Creator and how He wants us to live so that HE CAN LIVE AMONGST US. Surely He does not wish for us to die in the process. I personally believe that as long as we resort to killing, war, revenge, hateful dialect and other actions stemming from our physical side, the human race will drain itself down like a battery until we STOP. What is it all about? The Torah teaches us that He wishes for us to serve, to bring His light into the world so that He can be visible, not covered up.

THINK

PRAY SINCERELY that He make Himself visible in our world

And then

EMULATE His 13 attributes with trust so that He can be seen.