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How to Live and How to Die

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One of the first things I learned about my wife is that she loves children's stories. She loves the beautiful illustrations and she believes that the stories teach simple, honest truths. She even feels that some children's books are wasted on kids; that we should be the ones who are reading them and taking their lessons to heart.

One of her favorite stories is The Little Prince, by Antoine de Saint Exupery. She gave it to me and told me to take it to heart, and so I did. And I hope you will too. Here is a short selection from Chapter 21:

It was then that the fox appeared.

"Good morning," said the fox.

"Good morning," the little prince responded politely, although when he turned around he saw nothing.

"I am right here," the voice said, "under the apple tree."

"Who are you?" asked the little prince, and added, "You are very pretty to look at."

"I am a fox," the fox said.

"Come and play with me," proposed the little prince. "I am so unhappy."

"I cannot play with you," the fox said. "I am not tamed."

"Ah! Please excuse me," said the little prince.

But, after some thought, he added: "What does that mean – 'tame'?"

"You do not live here," said the fox. "What is it that you are looking for?"

"I am looking for men," said the little prince. "What does that mean – 'tame'?"

"Men," said the fox. "They have guns, and they hunt. It is very disturbing. They also raise chickens. These are their only interests. Are you looking for chickens?"

"No," said the little prince. "I am looking for friends. What does that mean – 'tame'?"

"It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."

"To establish ties?"

"Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world ..."

"I am beginning to understand," said the little prince. "There is a flower... I think that she has tamed me..."

"It is possible," said the fox. "On the Earth one sees all sorts of things."

"Oh, but this is not on the Earth!" said the little prince.

The fox seemed perplexed, and very curious.

“On another planet?”

“Yes.”

“Are there hunters on that planet?”

“No.”

“Ah, that is interesting! Are there chickens?”

“No.”

“Nothing is perfect,” sighed the fox.

But he came back to his idea.

“My life is very monotonous,” the fox said. “I hunt chickens; men hunt me. All the chickens are just alike, and all the men are just alike. And, in consequence, I am a little bored. But if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow. And then look, you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat.”

The fox gazed at the little prince, for a long time.

“Please – tame me!” he said.

In a few short pages, The Little Prince teaches a lesson that took the theologian Martin Buber a whole book to explain. That is, that there are two ways in which we can relate to each other. Antoine de Saint Exupery would call the more valued relationship is being “tamed.” Martin Buber calls it an “I-Thou” relationship.

The easiest way for me to explain the thinking of Buber, is to have you think about the difference between traveling with and without a camera. If I hold a camera in my hand when I travel, it completely changes my focus and my mindset. When I hold a camera, I am very aware of my surroundings. I make sure to know where the sun is. And I am always looking around, surveying the scene, searching for a way to tell a story about the place I am visiting, trying to capture a moment.

When I hold a camera, I tend to focus a great deal of my energy and thought process on what my photographs are going to look like. I want to take a picture that will mean something later, that will bring memories, and smiles. This is what goes on if I am carrying a camera.

However, if I don't have a camera with me, I have a completely different attitude; in fact, I can have a completely different experience. Without a camera, I am aware of my surroundings in a different way. I stop trying just to see them. Instead, I become immersed in them. I become a part of them. Without a camera I no longer have to evaluate what will create the best memories, instead I can focus directly on the experience. Without a camera, I am free to explore, free to indulge myself in the moment. I am free, who am I kidding, I am free to run after my kids. But you understand what I am getting at here, right?

Simply holding a camera can change the focus of an experience. With a camera we observe. We record. We document. We still participate, but we have a very different frame of reference. It is as if we are on the outside looking in.

The difference between these two experiences, between holding a camera and not, forms the basis of Martin Buber's theology. Martin Buber identifies two types of relationships: An “I-It” relationship,

which refers to a situation in which one is traveling with a camera; and an “I-Thou” relationship when one is traveling unencumbered.

According to Buber, most of life is spent in I-It relationships. That is, most of the time we are like people holding cameras. This means that when we relate to each other, we are usually not fully involved in the relationship. Instead, there is a part of us that stays outside, watching and evaluating what’s going on. This is a part of us that might be keeping an eye on the time, or remembering our next appointment, looking out the window, or thinking about what we want for dinner. Most of our relationships fall into this category.

An I-Thou relationship is different. It is special. An I-Thou relationship is one in which we become lost in the moment, and lose track of time, of where we are or what we have to do next. Falling in love is an I-Thou experience. But there are others: An engrossing movie can create an I-Thou experience. A really good conversation with a friend, a game of golf, a walk down the beach at sunset, all of these can be times when we lose ourselves in the moment, where we are so focused in on the experience that we forget about ourselves.

Most of our life is lived at an I-It level. Most of our relationships happen when we are preoccupied with something else. We have deadlines and schedules to keep. We keep track of each and every moment, always ready for the next event, ready to respond to the ring of a phone. We oversee every second of the day, never pausing, never slowing down, never allowing ourselves to get lost in a moment. After all, who really has the time? There is so much to do that we don’t even have time for ourselves. That is why we have Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the ultimate day of yourself. It is the Day of Atonement, the Day of Atonement, for being at one with yourself. And each and every requirement of this day, each and every mitzvah is designed to help us turn into ourselves, to become at one with ourselves.

And Yom Kippur is the one day that you can only truly experience on the I-Thou level. This is no easy task. For out of all of the services we might come to during the course of the year, this one is the most challenging. It is the one that affects us most personally. This is because Yom Kippur calls on us to examine our own mortality.

Yom Kippur is the climactic moment of a 40-day period that begins on Rosh Hodesh Elul. This entire period is intended for us to critically examine ourselves, judge ourselves and begin the process of Teshuvah, of changing.

During the last ten days, from Rosh Hashanah until now, this process intensifies. We are made to feel that our actions are now a matter of life and death. Listen to the liturgy: On Rosh Hashanah, our fate is written, and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die. On Rosh Hashanah, we are told the consequences of failing to do Teshuvah, of failing to right our wrongs. We are told that our life is on the line.

On Yom Kippur, on this night, we prepare ourselves for God’s verdict. And just in case we have not succeeded in changing our lives, we prepare ourselves for our deaths. We literally prepare ourselves for our deaths. Did you know that, according to halacha, the reason we are permitted to wear a tallis at this evening service is because tonight we stand before God in preparation for our deaths. We stand like corpses, wearing our kittels, dressed for our own funeral.

And as difficult as it might be to accept this idea, we can see it reflected in the other customs of the day. We are commanded not to eat or drink. Just as the dead do not require sustenance, neither do we. The other prohibitions of Yom Kippur are identical to the laws of mourning. A mourner is commanded to

abstain from marital relations, not to bathe, wear perfume or wear leather shoes. This day, we too are commanded to abstain from marital relations, not to bathe, wear perfume or leather shoes (literally, sandals). Taken collectively, the symbolism of this night suggests that we should see ourselves as standing before God like corpses, as we mourn for ourselves.

I know that this is gruesome imagery. It is gruesome, uncomfortable and even ugly but it is also powerful, awesome and true. For we are human, we are flesh and blood, and this is the time for us to consider our mortality.

One of the observations I have made over the years is that the death of a loved one is an incredibly powerful experience. In the encounter with death, we take off the masks we usually wear. We become real, and we ask difficult questions of ourselves. Death causes us to reflect on who we are, and what we wish to be. And yet, we never truly explore these questions in the wake of a death, because we are also trying to deal with the pain of our loss. We turn our focus inward, seeking to recover from our loss and relieve our pain. But pain consumes us and leaves us with little ability to consider these other ultimate questions.

The comprehension, the acknowledgement of death, the recognition that we are mortal and that our lives are finite has a tremendous impact on us. But we make a great mistake in that we only consider these issues in the wake of misfortune, when our thoughts are otherwise occupied. But why should we consider our imminent deaths only at times of pain and tragedy? Why not reflect on death when we are not in pain, when we can take our new understanding and make use of it? Why not reflect on death when it can have a positive influence on our lives.

The greatest reason that we do not follow this course of action is that our culture conspires against us. We are terrified of simply growing older. Thus, the idea of living a life that is cognizant of death seems an absurdity. Pick up any newspaper or magazine and you will see ad after ad aimed at making us youthful. We find skin creams, body lotions, plastic surgery, hair transplants, all for the sake of giving us a youthful appearance. Everyone tells us that nothing should be further from our minds than our deaths.

But American society was not always this way. In the book, The Undertaking, Thomas Lynch presents a different picture, as he describes a home built in 1880.

The house I live in here on Liberty was built in 1880. It had no plumbing at first. It had a cistern in the cellar to collect rainwater and likely had a pump in the kitchen and an outhouse in the backyard surrounded by lilacs. Next to the kitchen was a birthing room where agreeable women of that age had their babies. It was next to the kitchen because, as everyone knows, the having of babies and the boiling of water were gerundives forever linked in the common wisdom of the day. And after the babies were born and showed good signs of living, they were christened, often in a room up front, the priest or parson standing between the aunts and uncles and grandparents.

The homes were large [back then] to house multiple births and generations. These were households in which, just as babies were being birthed, grandparents were aging upstairs with chicken soup and doctors' home visits until, alas, they died and were taken downstairs to the same room the babies were christened in to get what was called then, 'laid out'.

Lynch describes a time in America when birth and death were a commonplace experience. They were so common that our homes were designed with them in mind. There are those of us who lived in these homes, who grew up with our extended families, when it was only natural that our homes were touched by death, really touched by death. Death was a natural part of life.

We no longer think of death as natural. After all, no one dies in public places anymore. If you are sick, you go to the hospital. If you are old, you go to a nursing home.

People do not die at home today. We hide death in every way possible. Even in hospitals, the dead are quickly covered up and removed from view. Death is seen as a mistake, a failure, an accident, a tragedy, not as a natural part of life. This is not the way it has to be. This is not how it should be. It is simply how our culture has evolved. But it is not healthy, and we do not have to accept it. And not all of us do.

One man who lived, or perhaps I should say died, differently was Morrie Schwartz. Morrie was a Professor of Philosophy at Brandeis University. When he learned that he had Lou Gehrig's Disease, Morrie decided that he would end his days in the same fashion that he lived them. He would die as a teacher. And his final lesson would teach how one dies in a gentle, gracious, honest, and true way.

Morrie Schwartz died on November 4, 1996, but today he is more renowned than at any time during his life. Morrie's first public exposure came via three appearances on Nightline. During his first appearance, a very dear former student of Morrie's happened to see the show, and it reminded him of the loving relationship he had had with his favorite professor.

Mitch Albom rekindled his relationship with his professor, meeting with him every Tuesday. At one point, they decided to record these sessions. And eventually, these tapes were used to create a beautiful tribute to the wisdom, kindness, and beautiful soul of Morrie Schwartz, allowing him to continue to do in death, what he most loved in life, to teach. If I were to summarize the teachings of Tuesdays with Morrie, it would be that if we really want to learn how to live, we must first be conscious of the fact that we will die.

Listen to Morrie teach [Mitch] about life:

"Everyone knows that they're going to die," he said, "but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently."

"So we kid ourselves about death," I said.

"Yes. But there's a better approach. To know you're going to die, and to be prepared for it at any time. That's better. That way you can actually be more involved in your life while you're living."

"How can you ever be prepared to die?"

"Every day, have a little bird on your shoulder that asks, 'Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?'"

There is a Jewish tale that teaches this same message. A student asked his rabbi, "Rabbi, when should I repent?" The rabbi answered: "You do not need to repent until the day before you die." "But rabbi," the student continued, "how do I know when that day will come?" "You don't, so prepare every day as if it were your last."

Morrie continues: "The truth is, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

"Did you think much about death before you got sick?" I asked.

"No." Morrie smiled, "I was like everyone else. I once told a friend of mine, in a moment of exuberance, 'I'm gonna be the healthiest old man you ever met!'"

"How old were you?"

"In my sixties."

"So you were optimistic."

“Why not? Like I said, no one really believes they’re going to die.”

“But everyone knows someone who has died,” I said. “Why is it so hard to think about dying?”

“Because most of us walk around as if we’re sleepwalking. We really don’t experience the world fully, because we’re half-asleep doing things we automatically think we have to do.”

“And facing death changes all that?”

“Oh, yes. You strip away all that stuff and you focus on the essentials. When you realize you are going to die, you see everything much differently.”

He sighed. “Learn how to die, and you learn how to live.”

Learn how to die and you learn how to live. That is the essence of this night, of this day. Kol Nidre calls us to consider our mortality, and use it as a springboard for refocusing ourselves, for being honest with ourselves, for making the most of our lives. In truth, death is a great teacher, it causes us to reflect on which of our fears and worries are really worth all that time and energy. It causes us to consider what we truly want out of our lives. It causes us to think about the legacy we wish to leave behind, how we want to be remembered when we are no longer here. If we judge our actions in this light, how would we spend our days?

In his search for meaning, Morrie sees the family as the basis for a good life. He says:

“The fact is there is no foundation, no secure ground, upon which people may stand today if it isn’t the family. It’s become quite clear to me as I’ve been sick. If you don’t have the support and love and caring and concern that you get from a family, you don’t have much at all. Love is so supremely important. As our great poet Auden said, ‘Love each other or perish.’

“Whenever people ask me about having children or not having children, I never tell them what to do. I simply say, ‘There is no experience like having children. That’s all. There is no substitute for it. You cannot do it with a friend. You cannot do it with a lover. If you want the experience of having complete responsibility for another human being, and to learn how to love and bond in the deepest way, then you should have children.’”

“So you would do it again?” I asked.

“Would I do it again? Mitch, I would not have missed that experience for anything. Even though ... even though there is a terrible price to pay, because I’ll be leaving them soon.”

Morrie reflects on what we all instinctively know. No one lying upon his deathbed wishes he had a little more time to spend at work. No, what we wish for, what we yearn for is the time we missed being with our family.

The grand theme of this day, of course, is atonement, forgiveness. And Morrie has a lesson to teach here too, as he shares a great regret with Mitch.

“Do you see that sculpture? ... That’s me. A friend of mine sculpted that maybe thirty years ago. His name was Norman. We used to spend so much time together. We went swimming. We took rides to New York. He had me over to his house in Cambridge, and he sculpted that bust of me down in his basement. It took several weeks to do it, but he really wanted to get it right.

“... Well, here’s the sad part of the story. Norman and his wife moved away to Chicago. A little while later, my wife, Charlotte, had to have a pretty serious operation. Norman and his wife never got in touch with us. I know they knew about it. Charlotte and I were very hurt because they never called to see how she was. So we dropped the relationship.

“Over the years, I met Norman a few times and he always tried to reconcile, but I didn’t accept it. I wasn’t satisfied with his explanation. I was prideful. I shrugged him off.

“Mitch, a few years ago he died of cancer. I feel so sad. I never got to see him. I never got to forgive. It pains me now so much ...”

He was crying again, a soft and quiet cry; and because his head was back the tears rolled off the side of his face before they reached his lips. "Sorry," I said. "Don't be," he whispered. "Tears are okay."

He continued: "It's not just other people we need to forgive," he finally whispered. "We also need to forgive ourselves."

"Ourselves?"

"Yes. For all the things we didn't do. All the things we should have done. You can't get stuck on the regrets of what should have happened. That doesn't help you when you get to where I am. Forgive yourself. Forgive others. Don't wait. Not everyone gets the time I'm getting. Not everyone is as lucky."

For whose sake do we grant forgiveness? When we forgive others, we heal ourselves. We let go of our grudges, the weights that hold us down, that bind us up. Why should we spend our time and energy on negative feelings towards others? Why should our minds be filled with anger or resentment? Aren't there better things that we can focus on than the harms we have suffered?

There is one last discussion I wish to share with you tonight. Mitch asks Morrie, in light of all that he has endured, what he would do if he could have one perfectly healthy day. One twenty-four hour period of good health, how would he spend it? And this is what Morrie says:

"I'd get up in the morning, do my exercises, have a lovely breakfast of sweet rolls and tea, go for a swim, then have my friends come over for a nice lunch. I'd have them come one or two at a time so we could talk about their families, their issues, talk about how much we mean to each other.

"Then I'd like to go for a walk, in a garden with some trees, watch their colors, watch the birds, take in the nature that I haven't seen in so long now.

"In the evening, we'd all go together to a restaurant with some great pasta, maybe some duck; I love duck, and then we'd dance the rest of the night. I'd dance with all the wonderful dance partners out there, until I was exhausted. And then I'd go home and have a deep, wonderful sleep."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

It was so simple. So average. I was actually a little disappointed. I figured he'd fly to Italy or have lunch with the President or romp on the seashore or try every exotic thing he could think of. After all these months, lying there, unable to move a leg or a foot, how could he find perfection in such an average day? Then I realized this was the whole point. This is the whole point. Our goal in life, our ultimate aim is not to create a lifetime of 'highs'. It is not to spend our days planning our next party, our next vacation, our next celebration. Our goal in life is to elevate the ordinary, to be fully present every day. If we live in this way, we will make our lives a blessing.

In twenty-four hours this day will pass, the book of life will be sealed, and we will return to our lives. But until then, we have this time, these moments to consider our death. What if today is my last? Have I lived well? Have I valued what is important? Will I be proud of my legacy?

If we use today to confront our mortality, then in tomorrow's call of the shofar we will hear the sound of our redemption. The book of life will be sealed, our names will be in it and we will have been granted a new life, a new chance, a new beginning. Let us treasure this gift.

May we learn to sanctify the everyday, make the ordinary holy, be fair to ourselves and to others, and present in our relationships. Let us make today count, make every day count.

Gemar Chatimah Tovah. May we be inscribed and sealed for good in the book of life. Amen.