

## **PERSPECTIVE**

### **Kol Nidrei 5799**

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My dad, whom some of you know, has always been a visually gifted person. As a microbiologist, he could visualize the body with all its intricacies and its disease systems, and imagine how they could be cured. He could repair almost anything by carefully seeing how things worked, and his hobbies were very visual: painting and carpentry. So you could imagine how perplexing it was for him to parent a daughter who barely noticed anything. “Be observant,” he would say with some frustration. “Notice what is around you.” But my vision was more laser-focused. Lots of things escaped me.

When it comes to one particular video on the news and social media, however, I'll bet what escaped me escaped most people. A few months ago, there was a time-lapsed video that showed a lava flow coming steadily down from a fissure of the Kilauea volcano. It crossed the street and engulfed a car, a Mustang, swallowing it up in flames.<sup>1</sup> The video went viral with the headline, "Lava Flow Swallows Car in Hawaii." I heard a radio interview of the owner, Mike Hale. "How did you feel when you saw that your car was destroyed by the lava?" the interviewer asked. His answer surprised me. "I didn't care about the car. It's just a car, and I wasn't sentimental about it. What I was upset about was the mailbox." The mailbox, I thought? What mailbox? He explained that next to the car was a mailbox in the shape of R2D2 the droid of Star Wars. His daughter had

made it for him, and he was very attached to it. When he saw the lava flow cross the street, he barely noticed his car, just the mailbox.

I don't know how he felt about the car before that day, but there is nothing like an approaching lava flow to put things in perspective. The car was a car. But the mailbox was a relationship, memories, love. That's what perspective can help us see.

Atul Gawande wrote about "perspective" in his book *Being Mortal*. In the book, Dr. Gawande understands "perspective" to mean "your personal sense of how finite your time in this world is."<sup>2</sup> Psychologists, he explains, have shown that if you can reasonably expect to live another 20 years, you behave as if you're immortal. With that perspective of immortality, however, we often "don't give

enough thought to what's most precious to us."<sup>3</sup> That perspective changes as we age. When we are younger, we might focus on ambition, opening outward, new experiences, wider social connections. But as we get older, we narrow in, and spend more time appreciating everyday pleasures and close relationships. And paradoxically enough for our youth-centered culture, the older we get the happier most of us become. Perspective is the wisdom so revered in those who are older.

Perspective, however, is not only a product of age. Gawande pointed to research that showed that people of any age who truly experienced their mortality, perhaps a result of a life-threatening illness or an accident, also had a radical change in perspective. The question was how much time we believe we have left—not how old we are.

Laura Carstensen, the psychologist who authored these studies, understood this insight first hand, because when she was 21 years old, she experienced a near fatal car accident. She wrote: “Every thought I’d had before [the accident] was: What was I going to do next in life? And how would I become successful or not successful? All of a sudden, it was like I was stopped dead in the tracks. When I looked at what seemed important to me, very different things mattered.”<sup>4</sup>

The perspective we have regarding our lifespan also affects the way we see material things. Remember Mike Hale who owned the unfortunate Mustang and the R2D2 mailbox. He also described to a reporter having to run into his house to save what he could before the house was potentially engulfed by flames. “I looked around and asked myself, ‘What’s valuable?’” In that moment, nothing looked

valuable. “I’m inside the house looking around, and to me everything looks like junk all of a sudden.” He became focused not on things but on relationships — and not just with his family but also with strangers needing help. When it was determined his property was safe, he not only returned himself with his family, but he welcomed people who didn’t have homes, to camp out on his property.<sup>5</sup> It all comes down to perspective.

Yom Kippur is about perspective. It is about bringing ourselves to a deeper understanding of impermanence and mortality, so that we can deepen our perspective no matter what our age or our health or our fortunes. Yom Kippur gives us this day as a gift, a day when our spiritual imaginations can experience a time soon before our death, so that we can emerge from this day more fully alive. How

does Yom Kippur do that? We stop eating and drinking, we say Yizkor. We are dressed in what Leonard Cohen calls in the song we heard earlier “rags of light,” a white that symbolizes both purity and mortality, being the ritual white clothes we will be buried in. We remind ourselves in the *Unetaneh Tokef* liturgical poem that we will soon chant, that each day our lives hangs on a thread, with much out of our control. It reminds us how “all of humanity is founded on dust—of dust they are made, and to dust they return . . . Like vessels of clay, they can break. Like grass they can wither, like flowers they fade.”

Yom Kippur gives us a deeper perspective. How do we live life with a deeper perspective? This question makes me think again of my father. One time a little over 15 years ago we were in Boston at my parents house, and it was a

weekday, a day when my father would go to downtown Boston to his work. He worked as a scientist and teacher, which he found truly meaningful but kept him very busy. I told him before he went to work that I would take Galya who was about 5 years old, to the Swan Boats. The outing was important to me because my grandfather had taken me when I was that age. Later in the day, we were in line for the boats. I looked up and there was my father! I knew what a busy day he had and was so surprised and so grateful that he left work to meet us there. When I told him, he said, "of course, how many opportunities do I have to be with my granddaughter on the Swan Boats?" He was right. Not many, actually. I think that was Galya's only ride. And it meant the world to me that he came. I felt that my father came out to be with us out of a deeper perspective, and that

perspective provided not only a memory but also an expression of love.

Yom Kippur provides us a safe space in time to face our mortality so that we can think about our lives and our priorities. It expands our imagination and says, treat these 24 hours as if it were the day before your last. What is important to you? What are the mustangs and what are the mailboxes in your life, so to speak? What is the forgiving we need to do? What is the time we need to spend with our families? What is the tzedakah we need to give? What is the spiritual awareness we need to increase? What is the wisdom we need to learn, impart or live by?

I know that so many of us in this room have gone through experiences that have taught us perspective in the

most intense and personal ways. For some it is the wisdom of age. For some it is the experience of losses of loved ones, and for some it is accidents or serious illnesses, or all of these. Yom Kippur can affirm, remind and deepen those lessons we have learned, but deepen those lessons without the accompanying grief, fear, or trauma. On Yom Kippur we embrace the perspective of mortality not in grief but in joy, because each day is a gift, and because we are connected to the one Source-of-all for whom, as the Psalmist says, “a thousand years are but a day in your sight.”

For Yom Kippur not only gives us a sense of our finitude of our own lives, it also gives us the perspective of the *infinitude* from which we come. One of the customs of these days is to visit the graves of our loved ones. As I stood this past week at the graves of my beloved grandparents

who died many decades ago, I remembered the “mailboxes” of our lives together, the time we made for each other and shared—going to Fenway Park with my grandfather; making gefilte fish with my grandmother. But I also felt the greater timelessness that they are now part of. I didn’t perceive only their mortality but also was comforted by an immortality that came to them, as they had become part of a unity that is so much beyond our reality. That is also a perspective of Yom Kippur. The *unetannah Tokef* says that “grass withers and flowers fade.” But it ends with the line about the unity which some call God from which we come: “no limit exists to the years of your life (oh God), no measure contains the array of your glory, your name is beyond all translation.”

Perhaps that is why the central idea of these days is called *Teshuvah*, the Jewish term for repentance but literally meaning “return.” Our loved ones who have died have returned to the Source, as we all will. With the perspective of the eternal return after our deaths, Yom Kippur teaches us that return is a part of all life, not only after death but also during life—the return to what is truly important. And while I don’t know much, I do feel sure that a lot of the things to which we give so much of our attention and space in our lives, the angers and resentments, the brand names and the status, will fade like flowers and wither like grass.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer teaches that we should do *teshuvah*, we should “return” one day before our death. His students asked: Does a person know on which day he or she will die? He said to them: That being the case, a person

should do teshuvah today, for perhaps tomorrow he or she will die; hence, all his or her days are passed in a state of teshuvah” (Talmud, Shabbat 153a).

It may not be possible to live each day literally as if it were the day before our last. But Yom Kippur does allow us this one day to live out Rabbi Eliezer’s teaching in a way that can make it a part of our consciousness throughout the year.

As it says in the *Unetannah Tokef*: “the great shofar is sounded and a still small voice is heard.” The Shofar is sounded saying—you are alive. And the still small voice is heard saying, remember how do you want to live. Expand your perspective.

May this day give us the perspective, the deep wisdom, to be alive in a way that we hear the “still small voice.” May

this day teach us to be alive each day of the year in a way that makes room for the Star Wars mailboxes and the Swan Boats and the love and kindness and forgiveness. May this day open our hearts in a way that truly writes us in the Book of Life.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOuWZ5k\\_k3w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOuWZ5k_k3w)

<sup>2</sup> Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014), p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> [https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/09/surgeon-author-atul-gawande-confronts-his-imperfections-in-hds-talk/?utm\\_source=SilverpopMailing&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Daily%2520Gazette%252020180910](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/09/surgeon-author-atul-gawande-confronts-his-imperfections-in-hds-talk/?utm_source=SilverpopMailing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily%2520Gazette%252020180910)

<sup>4</sup> *Being Mortal*, p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hawaiiinewsnow.com/story/38146018/despite-losing-home-and-livelihood-to-eruptions-an-evacuee-is-determined-to-help-others>