

Romemu Dvar Torah September 23, 2016

I don't know how many of you were with us last night for the panel discussion about being awake at the bedside, about palliative care and contemplative care for those who are in the last stages of their life. It's such a beautiful night to be sitting with our Buddhist friends, Koshin and Shodo, and Rabbi Amichai, Amichai as they called him, and my new friend Gina Sharp from the Insight Meditation Society. We sat together with this exquisite work, *Awake at the Bedside*, edited by Koshin Ellison.

He's a member of the community and Zen priest, and his partner Shodo. And we discussed how hard it is to look at the truth of impermanence, the truth of the reality that no one escapes this alive. We don't get out.

And that that reality and its natural byproduct, which is the denial of death that Ernst Becker spoke so powerfully about in his book, *The Denial of Death*, by that name, that actually being in denial is sometimes very useful and often very, very dangerous. That there are some things that we have to not know. There are some things that drip, drip, drip in a slow way, we're able to ingest, we're able to absorb at a rate that we can absorb. But then there are some things that we say we don't want to know, and we say no. And the Jewish tradition says that each and every year we have a 10-day period where from Rosh Hashanah all the way to Yom Kippur, from the beginning of the year, the head of the year, the dark moon of Tishrei, through the 10th day of Tishrei, those 10 days are a *kifitza*, it's a condensed life.

One day for a decade, and in the biblical sense, you're lucky if you live 70 years, right? *Shivim shana, v'im b'gvurot shimonim shana, y'mei shenoteinu shivim shana*. So here we have birth, life, and death, Yom Kippur, the great rehearsal of death. And so the Jewish tradition said, you have to look at it. You have to see it. So we sat there last night talking about the things that we try to avoid but can't. We do the avoid dance. We dance around the void, the abyss of not knowing, and we defer, hoping that somehow it won't come back.

I shared this story last night for those who were there. I had an awakening yesterday morning as I was sitting and preparing for last night's panel discussion, sitting in a Starbucks, kind of a good office to be in, and I was sitting and reading, and a colleague of ours looked over my shoulder and said, I wonder who's reading the book about *Awake at Bedside*? And it was a rabbi friend of ours, and she looked ashen and pale, and her hands were shaking. She said, I have to tell you what just happened. Any parent's worst nightmare just took place about 10 minutes ago. So I was listening.

We were on a Starbucks line. There were people behind us. The last two weeks, a coffee shop, I know, a coffee shop, I know. So we're standing, and she proceeds to say to me, Ayelet says, I was standing at the platform on 96th Street, and a woman was standing next to me, and she had a 4-year-old and a 2-year-old. It didn't end horribly, so breathe, breathe. But it was scary. As the train doors, she couldn't get onto the train, because there were so many people packing in, and the 4-year-old, wanting to be a good girl, she ran onto the train, and the doors closed. And there she was standing on the platform, and she started to howl, to scream, and the 2-year-old started to scream, and then everybody was screaming.

And because the conductor heard everyone screaming, he opened the doors quickly. You know the way the subway doors open like, you know, the jaws have opened, and my friend, Ayelit, stuck her hands in. And she said she was holding them open for dear life. And other people grabbed her, and they were holding, the whole train was holding. And then in Starbucks, as she was ordering her iced coffee, she said, look at my hands, they were black. Her hands were black from prying open that gate. And I couldn't stop thinking about that all day.

About how suddenly and how quickly things get taken away, and how quickly, without any preparation, as Rabbi Ellen Lu said, this is real, and you are completely unprepared. Jonathan Safran Foer, in his new book called, *He Named Me, Here I Am*, has a beautiful passage where he says, in the mouth of the protagonist, does one ever know the last time when they would be read a story from their parents? Does one ever know the last time that they would be sitting at the kitchen table, eating with their brother or sister? Does anyone ever get shown when the end of childhood happens, or when the end of anything happens? We don't know.

I imagine that Keith Scott didn't know, as he sat in his white truck two days ago, that policemen would be coming to issue a warrant for someone else, and sitting in his car, waiting for his son, as he always did, and his wife to bring back a charge cable for his phone, that policemen would surround his truck. I'm sure he didn't wake up that morning, saying, I think today is the day. I also imagine that the police officers weren't thinking either, that morning, that they would kill an unarmed black man. I'm sure the same thing is true for Terrence Croucher.

I'm sure it's true for so many more, unfortunately, African-American men and women throughout our country, who wake up not knowing if today will be the day when arbitrarily, but not so arbitrarily, the doors will close.

Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher, Moshe, on this Shabbos, maybe a couple thousand years ago, who knows, he spoke to a group of Israelites and told them that when they enter into the Holy Land, the land that he would not himself have the merit to see, when they would come into the Promised Land, that he would only witness from a mountaintop, there would be more mountains to see, he said. There would be a mountain called Har Grizim, and a mountain called Har Eval, and when you come into the land, each of these mountains will have their fate. One of them will be blessed and one of them will be cursed. You will place blessings on Har Grizim and curses on Har Eval. And Moshe already telling us that the Promised Land is not all it's promised to be.

That we arrive in the Promised Land and already there are curses waiting. Maybe the greatest curse of the Promised Land is that there is a mountain for curses and a mountain for blessings. And that some people, arbitrarily chosen tribes, will be on one mountain called blessing, and other tribes, arbitrarily, will be standing on another mountain.

When you enter that Promised Land, I'm not giving you a vision of how it's going to be so perfect and so beyond. It will be so great. I'm giving you a vision of a complex reality.

When you walk into that land, there will be blessings and curses. And then Moshe says, at the end of tomorrow morning's reading, lines that we should take to heart. He says to the people gathered around who have heard about the curses and the blessings, you stood at another mountain years before. And at that other mountain you heard Torah, you heard wisdom, you heard truth. But G-d did not give you ears and eyes to know that truth until this day, says Moshe. And G-d did not give you ears and eyes to know that truth until this day, says Moshe. The Lord has not given you, G-d's source has not given you an understanding heart and eyes to see and ears to hear until this day. It took you 40 years.

It has been 53 years since Martin Luther King stood at the Lincoln Memorial and said, I have a dream that one day, and we still live in that country of cursed mountains and blessed mountains, and our brothers and sisters who live under fear. And we don't want to hear it. I don't want to hear it, you don't want to hear it, we don't. We want to deny it like death. Because we're lucky enough to be on the blessed mountain, arbitrarily chosen to be able to walk down streets without fear.

To have little children like mine who walk up to police officers and say, Hi. And to sit this week with a dear friend who's married to an African American woman and whose children, they've been teaching their children since they're born, that you don't speak to police unless they speak to you, he said to me this week. And when you speak to them, make sure you say, Yes ma'am, no ma'am. And they were riding a bicycle, he told me, in New Jersey last week. And riding a bicycle, a police officer pulled them over, and he watched his son dutifully say, Yes ma'am, she said, you're riding a bike, you're riding it so well, he said, yes ma'am. And then she gave him an ice cream cone. And his hands, Dave said to me, his hands were still shaking. How polluted the environment still is because deep at its core, we don't want to acknowledge, we don't want to admit, we don't want to do tshuva. Deep, deep tshuva.

Deep returning, deep acknowledgement of our original sins. Moshe, the great leader said, you're going into the land, and that land will have curses and blessings. Some tribes will be on one, and some will be on the other.

And you will not know what I'm telling you until you are 40 years away. Says the Talmud, it takes 40 years to fully understand your teacher. So here we sit tonight. A week from a bombing in New York City. A week of death. Of a wife seeing her husband and the doors closing. And each and every one of us should have black tar on our fingers holding the door open. We should be standing together this Sunday at the Rivers Church on 86th Street to pray with our brothers and sisters. We should be, each and every one of us, imagining, as my friend Jay Michelson said, what if it were Jews that were being shot? What if it were Jews and Christians weren't? We are all implicated.

And I want to give a sermon tonight about meditation. I want each and every one of us to go home and breathe deep blessings into our hearts. But I can't get out of my head the power of one woman had to say, my hands are in the breach. And then everyone said, let's do it, let's open those doors.

Tomorrow evening, we gather for Selichot. And the theme at Romemu this year is awakening. So I hope that tonight, around the dinner tables, in addition to breathing love

and compassion, which we so deeply need, we'll also ask ourselves the question, how are we privy and party to continued racism? And how can we make a difference? How can we become aware of what we don't want to become aware of? How do we discuss what we deny? If we can do it with a tenor of love and understanding. And gosh, I hope I'm not being strident, everybody. I got to do this work, we all got to do this work.

There are gates that are closing and there are gates that are opening this holiday. Ours are the hands. Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles.

Let's rise.