

**The Truth about Death**  
**Yom Kippur 5777 – Yizkor**  
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I gained much insight into crafting sermons and an appreciation for storytelling from my teacher, Rabbi David Fass, when I was studying in Rabbinical School. I thank him for sharing this teaching with me that I can share it with you today...

Our attitudes towards death tell us a great deal about our attitudes towards life. What do we Jews think is the truth about death?

The Romans often displayed a human skeleton on festive occasions, and used it to instruct the revelers to “enjoy life while we may.” The ancient Egyptians were even more graphic. They actually had a servant carry around an open coffin containing the embalmed remains of a human being, and show it to each guest while reciting: “Look upon this and be merry, for this is how you will be when you are dead.”

This is not the Jewish way. We think the truth about death is far better summed up in the following words, written by a man who is himself now dead:

Lately I have been thinking about what the goal of life should be. At best, man's life is short. His life may be kind or harsh, easy or difficult, but the time passes before he realizes it. An old person wants to live no less than a young person. **The years of life do not satisfy the hunger for life.** What then shall we do during this time?

We can reach either of two conclusions. The first is that since life is so short we should enjoy it as much as possible. The second is that precisely because life is short and no one can completely enjoy it (for we die with half our desires unsatisfied), therefore we should dedicate life to a sacred and worthy goal, to sacrifice it for something which will be valued above life. At times the first feeling is stronger and at others the second one. Of late, however, I think that the second feeling is dominant. It seems that I am slowly coming to the conclusion that life by itself is worth little unless it serves something greater than itself.

The man who wrote these lines was named Eldad Pan. He was an Israeli soldier, a veteran of many battles. He died in 1948, during the Israeli War of Independence and wrote this just before he died. At the time of his death he was twenty years old.

Are our lives worthwhile? Do we serve something greater than ourselves? Again, **what we think is the truth about death will teach us about our attitudes towards life.**

In Judaism, there are three names for the cemetery, for the final resting-place of the dead. There is the *Bet HaKvarot*, the graveyard. There is the *Bet Olam*, the eternal abode. And there is the *Bet HaChayim*, the house of life. Each of these names embodies a truth about death. In each one there is a truth about life.

For some, death is a *Bet HaKvarot*, a graveyard. The grave is literally and figuratively the dead end, the point beyond which there is nothing. If that is all there is to life, there is indeed nothing better to do than to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die, and it all comes to an end. For such people, death makes a mockery of life and negates any attempt on our part to give it meaning.

Many such people really enter the graveyard long before they actually die. Their hearts are as cold and gray as the gravestones. In having nothing better to live for than the pleasures of the moment, they die long before their time. The Talmud calls them the living dead.

There are others who see death as a *Bet Olam*, an eternal abode. These people view life's task as adding something lasting, solid, unchanging, eternal, to the store of human accomplishments. Some are blessed with wealth and leave great buildings, bridges, statues. Others are inventors, or scientists, or just plain folks striving to etch their lasting, indelible, eternal mark on the sands of time. Still others are the quiet heroes who rise each morning, go into the world, and care for their families.

Yet neither of these is Judaism's ultimate view of death. That truth is reserved for those who are able to view death as a *bet ha-chayim*, a house of life. These favored few understand that **The results of our labors, even after we are gone, may not only endure, but may also have the power to create.**

Think for a moment about how much of the person you are now is due to the love, the teaching, the care, of those who have died. The mark they left is not in stone or wood, but in flesh and blood, in life that may beget more life. For someone who can leave such a living mark, death is neither a cold, stone tomb nor a changeless, eternal abode, but is truly transformed into a *Bet HaChayim*, a house of life.

Strangely enough, a person is able to reach the *Bet HaKvarot* or the *Bet Olam*, the graveyard or the eternal abode - unassisted. But for death to become a *Bet HaChayim*, a house of life, the work of the living is required.

The Biblical report of the death of King David reads, “And David slept with his fathers.” Why “slept?” ask the sages. Why not, “and David died?” Because, they reply, David left a son, King Solomon, who walked in his father’s ways and continued his good deeds. Therefore, it was as though he merely slept and was not really dead, since he lived on through the deeds of his son. David knew that it was the living who would determine whether his death was a *Bet Olam* or a *Bet HaChayim*.

Think, my friends, of what an awesome challenge lies before us at this and every *Yizkor* service. **The living, and only the living, have the power to grant or withhold immortality from the dead!**

Those whom we now memorialize with our *Yizkor* prayers have left us their lessons, their examples, their values. In their lifetimes, by and large, they strove, as Judaism requires, to serve something greater than themselves. They strove to be buried in the *Bet HaChayim*, the

house of life. But if it seems to us that some of them have entered the oblivion of the graveyard, or have lost the power to move us by resting in the eternal abode, the fault lies not entirely with them. The truth is, the fault is a least partly ours.

Have we made the effort to fully plumb the meaning of those departed lives? Did we have the courage to seek out fully the treasures of their spirit, or did we turn away, in impatience or in pain, as age or sickness ravaged them? Have we rested content with the memory of their lasting achievements without making the additions of our own that will turn their acts into a living memorial?

If we have done these things, than it is we who have deprived our loved ones of eternal life.

We too, are required to serve something greater than ourselves. We are blessed with the ability to choose between a living memorial and a cold and final death. Let us then choose to serve the ideals of the past and the dreams of the future through what we do each moment of the present. Let us do their work, and our own, so that our memorials will be living, breathing people, not cold, unyielding stone.

The truth, the Jewish truth is that in so doing, we will bestow the blessing of immortality on our loved ones. Through us, they do not die, they do not come to a final, cold end, but continue as did King David, to sleep with their ancestors, in the *Bet HaChayim*, the house of life.