

I want to wish all of you and your families a *g'mar chasima tova*. May you all be sealed in the *Sefer Hachaim*—the Book of Life—on this *Yom Kippur*, and be granted *selicha* and *mechila*, full atonement, on this day, together with the rest of *Klal Yisrael*. May this be a year of *bracha* and *hatzlacha*, *refuos* and *yeshuos*, and *achdus* and *shalom* for all of *Am Yisrael*.

Thank you to Bruce and Julie Fried, who are sponsoring this *drasha* in memory of Milton Fried, Yitzchak Mordechai ben Avraham, whose *yahrtzeit* is tomorrow, 11 Tishrei. May his *neshama* have an *aliya* and may the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

Today is the 727<sup>th</sup> day of the war in *Eretz Yisrael*. We must continue to *daven* for the *chayalim* who are *moser nefesh* to protect our people. We must continue to *daven* for the release of all the hostages. We must continue to *daven* for a *refuah shleima* for all those who have been wounded and injured and traumatized in this war. We must continue to *daven* for the safety and security of *Acheinu B'nei Yisreal*, in *Eretz Yisrael* and throughout the world.

Looking around today, I see many of us wearing **white** on *Yom Kippur*. Many men wear a **white kittel** (many wear a white *kipa*). And many women wear **white** clothing on *Yom Kippur*, as well. When there was a *Beis Hamikdash*, the *Kohen Gadol* wore special **white** clothing on *Yom Kippur* when he performed the most important part of the *avoda* in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*. And the **Mishna (Taanis 4:8)** describes girls going out specifically wearing **white** dresses, on this holy day of *Yom Kippur* בנות ירושלם יוצאות בכלי לבן.

The obvious question: why the preference for wearing **white** on *Yom Kippur*?

**R. Mordecai Yaffe**, 16<sup>th</sup> century author of the **Levush**, suggests two reasons.

לבוש אורח חיים סימן תרי: נוהגין ללבוש בגדים לבנים נקיים דוגמת מלאכי השרת, וכן נוהגים ללבוש קיט"ל שהוא לבן ונקי, וגם לפי שהוא לבוש של מתים לפי מנהגינו, ועל ידי זה נכנע ונשבר לב אדם לעשות תשובה שלימה.

*It is customary to wear clean white clothes, such as the ministering angels, and it is also customary to wear a kittel, which is white and clean, and also because it is the garment of the dead, according to our customs, and by doing so, a person's heart surrenders and breaks, causing complete repentance.*

The first reason is that this is the day of forgiveness of sins, and we therefore wear white, which symbolizes the **purity of the angels**. Purity, represented by white, is certainly appropriate for *Yom Kippur*. This explanation is confirmed by the way we act like *malachim* on *Yom Kippur*--abstaining from eating and drinking, and also by reciting "*Baruch shem k'vod malchuso*" **out loud** as the angels do.

However, the *Levush* suggested a second—and more jolting--reason. White, he says, is the color of *tachrichim*, burial shrouds. On *Yom Kippur*, we confront the inevitability of death. Reminding us of our mortality serves to break us, humble us, and cause us to repent. As the **Gemara in Brachos 5a** teaches:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ה עמוד א: אמר רבי לוי בר חמא אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע, שנאמר רגזו ואל תחטאו. אם נצחו - מוטב, ואם לאו - יעסוק בתורה, שנאמר: אמרו בלבבכם; אם נצחו - מוטב, ואם לאו - יקרא קריאת שמע, שנאמר: על משכבכם; אם נצחו - מוטב, ואם לאו - יזכור לו יום המיתה, שנאמר: ודמו סלה.

*Rabbi Levi bar Hama said that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination, i.e., that one must constantly struggle so that his evil inclination does not lead him to transgression, as it is stated: "Tremble, and do not sin." If one succeeds and subdues his evil inclination, excellent, but if he does not succeed in subduing it, he should study Torah, as alluded to in the verse: "Say to your heart." If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should recite Shema, which contains the acceptance of the yoke of God and the concept of reward and punishment, as it is stated in the verse: "Upon your bed," which alludes to Shema, where it says: "When you lie down." If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death, whose silence is alluded to in the continuation of the verse: "And be still, Selah."*

These two very different answers to this question of the significance of wearing white on Yom Kippur, remind me of a clever comment of **Rav Yaakov Galinsky** regarding the groom's parents holding his arms, as they walk him down the aisle.

והגדת הר' יעקב גלינסקי עמ' 154: התבקשתי פעם לשמה חתן, בחתונה שנכחו בה גדולי הדור. עליתי ושאלתי: מה זה שההורים אווזים בחתן, לופתים אותו מזה ומזה, האם אינו יודע ללכת בעצמו? נענה הרב מפונוביז' זצ"ל ואמר: יתכן שהטעם הוא אותו טעם שבגללו מלבישים אותו את ה"קיטל" הגלימה הלבנה, משום "יזכר לו יום המיתה" (ברכות ה' ע"ב) שאז נושאים אותו... וה"אמרי חיים מויז'ניץ זצ"ל אמר: הם אווזים בו, כדי לעצור בעדו שלא ירוץ מהר מדי... תשובה ליטאית ותשובה חסידית, ואלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים...

*I was once asked to make a bride and groom happy, at a wedding attended by the great leaders of the generation. I went up and asked: Why is it that the parents hold the groom, grasp him from one side and the other; does he not know how to walk on his own? The **Ponovezher Rav, zt'l**, answered: It is possible that the reason is the same reason why he is dressed in the white robe "kittel," because "to be reminded of the day of death" (Berachos 5b) when he will be carried [to his grave]... But the **Imrei Chaim of Vizhnitz zt'l**, said: They are holding him, in order to stop him from running too fast in his great excitement... A Litvish answer and Chassidish answer, and these and those are the words of the living God...*

Is the Levush simply presenting both a *Litvish* and a *Chassidish* answer?

I believe the two answers are actually connected...one leads to the other...remembering the day of death helps us act like *malachim*...but let us explore...

Of these two reasons, the first — that we play the role of angels--certainly seems more attractive. The second--rehearsing for death--strikes us, at first glance, as terrifying and morbid, and almost in conflict with the tone of the day. Is focusing on death a proper posture for a day on which we recite the majestic, life-affirming words, of the *Navi Yechezkel*:

יחזקאל פרק יח פסוק לב: כִּי לֹא אֶחְפֹּץ בְּמֹת הַמָּת נֶאֱמַר ה' אֱלֹקִים וְהִשִּׁיבוּ וְהָיוּ:

*"For I do not desire for anyone to die, says Hashem, rather repent and live!"*

*Yom Kippur* is a day set aside to offer forgiveness, second chances, to the Jewish people. The **Ramban** says that *Yom Kippur* is fundamentally a day of *rachamim*, boundless mercy.

רמב"ן ויקרא פרק כג פסוק כד: והנה זה מבואר כי הכל תלוי בתשובה, אלא בראש השנה מתיחד במדת הדין ומנהיג עולמו, וביום הכפורים במדת הרחמים, והוא מאמרם (ר"ה לב ב) מלך יושב על כסא דין וכו', ראש השנה יום דין ברחמים ויום הכפורים יום רחמים בדין:

Yet, when we think about it, there is much evidence to support the second reason. The *kittel* is truly a garment that remind us of death because is in, in fact, the actual burial shroud in which we will be buried. We recite the *vidui* or confessional ten times on *Yom Kippur*, the prayer which a Jew is to recite before his death. The day concludes with the recitation of the *Shema*, which every Jew is to utter as his last words on earth. The custom in many communities is to light not only *yahrtzeit* candles for the deceased, but a נר הבריא, a candle for each of the living, as well--a premature *yahrtzeit* candle, as it were. We refrain on *Yom Kippur* from physical pleasures—eating, drinking, and so forth--as if our bodily processes had come to a halt.

In this symbolism of death lie a number of profound thoughts that go beyond *Yom Kippur* and enlighten us about the most significant aspects of life and destiny. To begin, we must get rid of the attitude that makes us recoil from thinking of death. Mortality seems morbid only to those who would like to go through life under the illusion that they will live forever. We prefer not to confront death--the most elementary fact of nature—as if we can thereby stave off the final moment. Morrie Schwartz, the subject of Mitch Albom's bestselling work *Tuesdays with Morrie*, said: "Everyone knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently."

*Yom Kippur* asks us to **confront** death, by play-acting the reality of death in symbolic form, and thereby adjusting to the idea of our own mortality. It teaches us to accept death as a reality and seize the moments of life, using them fully. A truly pious Jew does not welcome death—because life is too precious. Only in this

world can man serve Hashem and observe the Torah. But at the same time, a believing Jew should not be terrified of death or imagine he can defeat it, either.

**Franz Rosenzweig**, the great Jewish philosopher of Frankfurt in the early part of the 20th Century, wrote of his own experience with impending death. *Once death is accepted, once it becomes more familiar, it loses its terror. He said, "the less I fear death... the more freely can I live."* It seems to be no coincidence that Rosenzweig returned to his faith after attending a *Kol Nidre* service. Years later, he described the *Yom Kippur* experience as *"confronting the eyes of the Judge in utter loneliness, as if one were dead in the midst of life."*

This annual pre-experience of death helps us to live not only calmer and less fearful lives, but also **more profound and meaningful, lives**. The awareness of our own mortality leads us to a more realistic perspective, a more honest and intelligent ordering of our priorities, a preference for authentic values over the frivolities that otherwise intrude into our thinking and our lives.

As Shlomo Hamelech said in *Koheles*:

קהלת פרק ז: (ב) טוב ללכת אל בית אבל מלכת אל בית משתה באשר הוא סוף כל האדם והחי יתן אל לבו:

*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting: for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart.*

He is telling us that a reminder of our death is positive if we take the lesson to heart. It will make us live more meaningful lives, and enjoy our blessings that much more...

The **Gemara** in **Brachos 31** relates that, at the wedding of Mar, the son of Ravina, the *Chachamim* asked Rav Hamnuna to sing a song. This is what he sang: ווי לן דמיתגן, ווי לן דמיתגן "Woe to us that we die! Woe to us that we die!"

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף לא עמוד א: אמרו ליה רבנן לרב המנונא זוטי בהלולא דמר בריה דרבינא: לישרי לן מר! - אמר להו: ווי לן דמיתגן, ווי לן דמיתגן!

Since we have an obligation to rejoice with the bride and groom at a wedding, how was it proper for Rav Hamnuna to say something that would cause sadness?

I think the answer is that when you appreciate your limited time here, you can more easily focus on appreciating the your blessings. When you focus less on the physical and fleeting, and more on the meaningful and enduring, you can find deeper joy. We should tend to our *neshamos*, to our families—our spouses and children and parents, to the Jewish people, to Torah and *mitzvos* and *chesed*. Facing death makes us stop and think about how we want to be remembered...after our lives have ended.

In his introduction to the *Koren Machzor for Yom Kippur*, **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** tells the story of Alfred B. Nobel. The world's most famous awards are the Nobel Prizes. Presented for outstanding achievement in literature, peace, medicine and the sciences, these prizes were created a century ago by Nobel, who amassed his fortune by producing dynamite and other explosives. What motivated this Swedish munitions millionaire to dedicate his fortune to honoring and rewarding those who benefited humanity? **One morning at breakfast, Alfred Nobel opened his newspaper and read that he had died.** The obituary stated: [*Le marchand de la mort est mort.*] ("The merchant of death is dead.") and went on to say, "*Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday.*" It turned out that the newspaper had made a mistake; it confused him with his brother, Ludvig, who had indeed passed away the previous day. Faced unexpectedly with his own mortality, Alfred Nobel was shaken by how he would be remembered. Determined to turn his destructive genius into a more positive legacy, he set aside the bulk of his estate to establish the Nobel Prizes; including, of course, the Nobel Peace Prize. A mistaken obituary compelled Alfred Nobel to confront his mortality. Each year, the holiness of *Yom Kippur* offers us the same opportunity.

What would our lives be like if we lived as if death were imminent? As if life doesn't last forever? As a rule, most of us don't think much about the inevitability of death. Thinking about how our obituary is going to read can motivate us to rethink how we are currently spending our lives.

The **Gemara in Shabbos 153a** teaches, in the name of Rabbi Eliezer, that one should do *teshuva* one day before he dies. His students asked him: How do we know when we will die? He answered: Exactly...do *teshuva* every day like it may be your last.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קנג עמוד א: תנן התם, רבי אליעזר אומר: שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך. שאלו תלמידיו את רבי אליעזר: וכי אדם יודע איזהו יום ימות? - אמר להן: וכל שכן, ישוב היום שמא ימות למחר, ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה.

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**, in an ethical will to his children, written before *Yom Kippur*, called "Letters to the Next Generation," writes: *I studied philosophy at university, but the deepest philosophy lessons I ever learned came from attending Jewish funerals. That's when we face the truth about what makes a life worthwhile. We catch a glimpse of what lives on after us, what people will remember us for, what difference we make in this brief span of years that is all God gives us. No one ever delivered a hesped, a funeral oration, saying: "Mr. X. What a man he was. He drove a Lamborghini, dressed in Armani, wore a Patek-Philippe.... This was a giant. We shall not see his like again." We know that a speech like that would be mad. Let me let you into a secret. . . We have to make space for the things that really matter: relationships, marriage, the family, being part of a community, celebrating, giving thanks, being part of a tradition and its wisdom, a faith and its blessings, giving to others and sharing with them our joys and grief. There has to be room in life for something bigger than us, larger than self-interest and longer than a lifetime. There are times when we have to let the soul sing, to express gratitude and know that what we have is God's gift. That's what living Jewish-ly does. It structures our lives around the things that matter – the things that are important but not urgent, and therefore tend to be neglected until it is too late. Don't leave it until it is too late.*

*Yom Kippur* teaches us that crucial lesson. With no water to wash yourself, no oils to anoint yourself, no wealth to accumulate —*Yom Kippur* is indeed a reminder of the inescapable reality of death, and of the frivolity and folly of wasting our lives frantically climbing the social ladder. *Yom Kippur* forces us to consider that, ultimately, when we define ourselves by the body—then, no matter what trappings and trimmings we have acquired, all are ultimately equal in the grave: rich and poor, famous and obscure. But, even after death, there **is** a difference between the *rasha* and the *tzaddik*, the nasty and the kind, the pitiless and the gentle, the indifferent and the loving, the evil and the good. The everlasting mark we make on our families, and community---through a commitment to kindness and faith—these are the things that count--what we are or have made of ourselves, not what we have accumulated. That is what will live forever.

I read recently about Dr. Dan Gottlieb, a psychologist who, as a young man, was in a nearly fatal accident that left him a quadriplegic. Asked how the accident changed his life, Gottlieb responded "I live, as the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said we should live—**with death on my shoulder**. The vision I have about my accident is that **when my neck broke my soul began to breathe....** ... Most people I know spend their lives trying to be the person they think they should be and never get to discover who they are."

In **Psalm 49**, King David said: תהלים פרק מט פסוק יח – יט: (יה) כִּי לֹא בְּמוֹתוֹ יִקַּח הַכֹּל לֹא-יִרְדּוּ אַחֲרָיו כְּבוֹדוֹ: when a person dies, he cannot take it ALL with him. Asks the **Malbim**—לא יקח הכל— sounds like he can take something. So what does one take?

מלבי"ם תהלים פרק מט פסוק יח: (יה) כי אם לא במותו יקח הכל, אם אין הקנינים מתעצמים עמו עד שיוכל לקחתם עמו בעת מותו, ע"י שיוציא ממנו לצדקה ומע"ט שאז הקנינים הם שלו גם אחר מותו, כי הצליח במ את נפשו והלך לפניו צדקו... כי, מי שרוצה שיהיו הקנינים שלו, צריך שיוציאם בצרכי נשמתו,

We cannot take anything physical with us—but whatever we invested in our *neshama*, the soul, the funds we invested in *tzedakah*—the time invested in Torah learning, *maasim tovim* and insuring that our children have

good values, and making the world a better place. That's what we can take with us. It is a real eternal part of us that never leaves...Seize these precious moments of life!

These are the true priorities--the values of Torah and *mitzvos*, faith, goodness, kindness, *tzedakah*--values which we too often neglect and relegate to the periphery of our lives. All the rest is ultimately trivial, frivolous, and dispensable. In this sense, Yom Kippur--as a preview of *yom ha-misah*--educates us about what is really important and what is not, which values are worthy and which are not.

*Yom Kippur* is the day to define who we are. It is the day to confront our mortality. To think about the legacy we will leave behind, the *yahrtzeit* candles that will—one day--be lit for us. It is a day to confront the fact that we will not be here forever, and seize the day, use our time in this life productively. This should not be a sad thought, but a sobering thought. Because with that understanding and definition comes a transformation, not only of ourselves, but also of the very meaning of the symbolism of the *kittel* and other white garments. When viewing the *kittel* as a shroud has successfully taught us this lesson, then the *kittel* no longer represents merely a shroud — but the pure whiteness of the angels. If we truly accept the second symbol, that of death, we will find ourselves better appreciating the first—a meaningful, deeper, and purer life, emulating the angels.

This also explains the connection between the *Litvish* and *Chassidish* explanations of wearing white. When we live life with clarity and urgency, the ghostly white turns into angelic white. Yom Kippur is no longer a rehearsal of death but a celebration of life. And on *Yom Kippur* we recite not only *Shema Yisrael*, as does one with his last breath, but also *Barukh shem kevod*, which tradition teaches is reserved for the angels, and which mortals may proclaim aloud only on *Yom Kippur*. If we allow *Yom Kippur* to remind us of *yom ha-misah*, the day of death, it will teach us to appreciate life and therefore work harder to deserve a year of life and health and peace.

We are about to recite *Yizkor*. Death seems so distant, so unreal—until it happens to a loved one—and suddenly we see how close to home it really can be... *Yizkor* serves as another wake up call. We must remember our mortality—and take advantage of our time here on earth. But *Yizkor* is primarily a time to remember our loved ones, the lives they lived, the effect they had on us, the mark they left on the world, and how invariably their days were too few, and the void left by their passing. *Yizkor* is a reminder of death—to stimulate us to take advantage of life and live it to the fullest. We must always remember that it's never too late for us to change, to start again, and live differently from the way we've done in the past; and to make the most of our time on this earth. As long as there is life, there is possibility for change, for improvement.

This year we also remember the many *kedoshim* who have died defending our people in *Eretz Yisrael*, the *chayalim* who died at *kiddush Hashem*. We must be inspired by their sacrifice, what they gave their lives to protect, to live on in their *zechus*, carrying on their hopes and dreams for the Jewish people.

This is the ultimate meaning in white; the endless possibilities in front of us today. **Kedudas Levi** teaches this as another dimension of symbolism behind the color white we wear today—he says white represents a blank canvas—the endless possibilities for the new year ahead...for the work of art we are tasked with painting in the coming year...

קדושת לוי שמות לפורים:ובזה תבין מה שהכהן גדול היה לובש ביום הכפורים בגדי לבן, כי המראה לבן אין בו גוון כלל, רק שאחר כך יכול לקבל כל הגוונים.

May we learn this lesson, may we return to Hashem on this *Yom Kippur* and may we be sealed for a year of health and happiness—but more importantly, a year of meaning, spiritual growth and improvement. Let us begin to live fuller, more meaningful lives. Let us reveal the angel inside, the *neshama tehora* inside us, and may this be a year of *geula* for our people, and *shalom* for the Jewish people and the world...