

**Late at night on July 20th I joined thousands and thousands of people on the National Mall captivated by Apollo 50: Go for the Moon. We watched and listened as images and archival footage were projected on the Washington Monument and massive screens alongside audio recordings to recreate, 50 years later, Apollo 11's rocket launch and landing.**

**The excitement was palpable and I'm sure it only paled in comparison to what it was like to watch it all in real time five decades ago.**

After the show we headed to a late night program at the Air and Space Museum. As we waited in line, my brother pulled up the following on his phone and read it to us:

**“Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace will stay on the moon to rest in peace.**

**These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also know that there is hope for mankind in their sacrifice.**

**These two men are laying down their lives in mankind's most noble goal: the search for truth and understanding.**

**They will be mourned by their families and friends; they will be mourned by their nation; they will be mourned by the people of the world; they will be mourned by a Mother Earth that dared send two of her sons into the unknown.**

**In their exploration, they stirred the people of the world to feel as one; in their sacrifice, they bind more tightly the brotherhood of man.**

**In ancient days, men looked at stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood.**

**Others will follow, and surely find their way home. Man's search will not be denied. But these men were the first, and they will remain the foremost in our hearts.**

**For every human being who looks up at the moon in the nights to come will know that there is some corner of another world that is forever mankind.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/events/centennials/nixon/images/exhibit/rn100-6-1-2.pdf>

It's a stunning speech.

Beautifully crafted.

Eloquent in its tribute.

Reverently captures the trauma of leaving behind two explorers to die.

It's a *perfect* eulogy.

It was penned by William Safire and given to Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman on July 18, 1969. It is entitled "In Event of Moon Disaster." And, as we well know, it was never delivered by President Nixon.

This memo was a contingency speech.

Written just in case of a catastrophe preventing Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin from getting *off* the moon.

Once on the moon, there was no guarantee they'd return. There was no knowing if the steps left in moon dust would be their last.

And so, on Earth, just a few miles from here, preparations were made for their deaths.

The speech was to be preceded by a call from the president to the "widows-to-be" and after the statement was to be made, after NASA would end communications with Armstrong and Aldrin, the memo read, "A clergyman should adopt the same procedure as a burial at sea, commending their souls to "the deepest of the deep," concluding with the Lord's Prayer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/events/centennials/nixon/images/exhibit/rn100-6-1-2.pdf>

Their funerals were planned, their eulogy written, the only caveat...they were still alive.

Meandering on a rock 238,900 miles from home.

Dependent on a piece of metal to safely and successfully *lift* them off the moon and transport them *back* to Earth.

If they couldn't get off the moon, there were only two options.

Starve.

Or take their own lives.<sup>3</sup>

Three decades went by before the undelivered speech surfaced when historian James Mann came across it in Nixon administration archives.<sup>4</sup>

I've read and reread this speech countless times and it gives me the chills each and every one.

Not only because it's a stunningly beautiful eulogy.

But because they succeeded in their mission.

And they didn't die.

We tend not to write eulogies for the very much alive.

We don't like talking about, nevertheless planning for, death.

The existence of this speech is completely countercultural.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://watergate.info/1969/07/20/an-undelivered-nixon-speech.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/07/12/speech-richard-nixon-would-have-given-event-moon-disaster/>

Walking on the moon was one giant leap for humankind.

But for those two astronauts who took the small steps on its surface, the moon walk was a stroll between life and and the possibility of death.

It was with the knowledge that this stroll led to the unknown that this speech was written. That their funerals were planned. That the conversations with the widows-to-be were outlined.

Armstrong and Aldrin did not know if their steps on the moon would be their final steps in life.

And while very few, if any of us, will find ourselves meandering the moon's surface.

That stroll between life and death....

We are on it. Every. Single. Day.

We don't know with any amount of certainty how long the stroll will take.

The only thing we do know with certainty is that, one day, we will die.

And that makes most of us extraordinarily uncomfortable.

Most of us don't want to think about our own mortality, the possibility that we will one day take our final breaths, walk our final steps. And we especially don't want to confront the fact that we don't know how soon that might be.

So we avoid it.

Our ancestors *both* had a good sense that we wanted to avoid this uncomfortable subject *and* also knew how important it was to confront it.

So, they strategically designed the 25-hour observance of *Yom Kippur* as a rehearsal for our own death, ordaining that we:

Wear white, symbolic of traditional burial shrouds.

Abstain from the activities that make us human:

Food

Water

Wearing leather

Adorning ourselves in perfume

Sex

Bathing

Many of us embrace the abstention rituals. For those able to fast, we don't mind depriving ourselves of food and water. These are physical acts that our rational minds can contend with, disassociated from the reason that we do them.

But to think about our own impending death? To imagine all of the unknowns? To think of the possibility that this seat may not be filled by us one year from now. For most of us that is *too much*.

And so we ignore the call of *Yom Kippur*. We ignore the fact that the intention of this day is to practice what it means to be dead, to come face-to-face with our own mortality, to pour our heart and soul into making things right with one another, with God, with ourselves--in the hopes that we can get our affairs in order should this be our last day, the last bit of our stroll.

One recent meme entitled Jewish Holidays for Non-Jews refers to Yom Kippur as Jewish Apology Day, sandwiched between Jewish New Year and Nomadic Hut Appreciation Week.<sup>5</sup>

But Yom Kippur is more than Jewish Apology Day.

It's the end of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Fear. We spend time atoning and seeking forgiveness--from God and from one another. And we pray over and over again, countless times in our liturgy, pleading to be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

We have a concluding service, *Neilah*, where we imagine the gates closing and locking as we desperately try to shimmy our prayers through the narrowing gap, to squeeze into those very last moments one more *Vidui*, one more admission of our shortcomings, and one last request of God, to make sure our names are written down in the Book of Life before the book is closed.

Each year we are forced to confront our own mortality by rehearsing it.

And yet most of us are expert avoiders.

Because death is taboo.

And scary.

And, we don't want to think about it!

So, SorryNotSorry, but we're going to think about it this morning.

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<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157642300877603&set=a.10153418706467603&type=3&theater>

We're going to face those fears...remember those narrow bridges we talked about last week?

Facing death is one of them.

And while we will ultimately succumb to death, we do not need to succumb to the fear of facing death.

We proclaim that on Rosh HaShanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many will pass away from this world,  
How many will be born into it;  
Who will live and who will die;  
Who will reach the ripeness of age,  
Who will be taken before their time;  
Who by fire and who by water;  
Who by war and who by beast;  
Who by famine and who by drought;  
Who by earthquake and who by plague;  
Who by strangling and who by stoning;  
Who will rest and who will wander;  
Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled;  
Who will be calm and who tormented;  
Who will live in poverty and who in prosperity;  
Who will be humbled and who exalted--<sup>6</sup>

We stand here and sing this haunting prayer repeatedly throughout *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

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<sup>6</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh, Untaneh Tokef*, p. 212

We ask these questions: Who shall live and who shall die? Who by this way and who by that? And, despite the musical setting that gives us chills, most of us force ourselves to stand apart from this prayer.

It's not us.

It can't possibly be us who will die and live in these troubling ways....

We glance around the room--

Maybe it will be the person three rows ahead of me.

The person across the way.

But I, *I* will live another year

And return to say this prayer again

And again.

But

Deep in our hearts, we know this isn't the case.

We know our health has changed over the past year.

We know that one literal wrong step or turn can dramatically alter the course of our lives...and in some cases end it.

We know that one mass of abnormal cell growth

One heart incident

One infection

Or just the aging fragility of our bodies

Can lead to us not being here in a year.

As Rabbi Elyse Goldstein of Toronto wrote, “We want the inevitable question of who was here last year that isn’t here now and who is here this year that won’t be here next year to be a poem, or a parable. It’s not. It’s a wake-up call, it’s a shofar blast of warning. No one knows when the gates will close forever so while we are inside them we had better love passionately, fight passionately, learn passionately, live passionately. “*U-netaneh tokef kedushat hayom, ki hu norah v’ayom*” Let us declare the holiness of this day because it contains an awful truth.”<sup>7</sup>

The prayer doesn’t ordain when or how we will die. Rather it brings us face-to-face with the knowledge that death is inevitable.

Buzz Aldrin shared the following reflection about what happened after walking on the surface of the moon, “...I lay down on the floor...and I’m looking around at the dust that came in and there’s this little black object that didn’t look like it belonged there...This was a circuit breaker that was broken...So I look at the row of circuit breakers and it says “Engine Arm.” That’s the one in the lander...[when] you get ready to land, you push that thing in...you get on the surface of the moon, you pull that out. Well if you want to come home you got to push that thing in again but it’s broken off....So we were coming pretty close to not being able to come home.”<sup>8</sup>

It was s a small floating black object that would make the difference between life and death for Aldrin and Armstrong.

That’s *Yom Kippur*. The knowledge and acknowledgment that we just don’t know what small thing can alter, or end, our lives, and so we had best figure out what it means to live well. And die well.

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<sup>7</sup> *Yom Kippur Reflections*, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, p. 155-56

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdGVYfJzkhA>

Who shall live?

I will.

Who shall die?

I will.

The unknowns, however, are *how* we will die and *how much time* we have of life until the day comes.

And so *Yom Kippur* really gives us two opportunities if we are willing to own them:

1. To commit to the ways that we can best live out the time we have left.
2. To commit to doing the thinking about what will, and putting in place the tools necessary to, allow ourselves to die well.

*Yom Kippur demands that we commit to the ways we can best live out the time we have left.*

Why focus on our death once a year?

To remind us of our limited time on this earth. To remind us that we are temporary visitors. To encourage us, with this knowledge, to recalibrate ourselves and make sure we are living our best lives.

If the premise of *Yom Kippur* is that we will all die, then the prayers of *Yom Kippur* demand that we take a good hard look at how we ought to live out the short time we have on this earth before it comes to end:

*Kol Nidrei*--a reminder of the strength of vows and the importance of not making them. "Let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone; they are not valid and they are not binding."<sup>9</sup> *We live out our best selves when we stop committing to promises that we cannot keep.*

*Vidui*--Confession of all of our communal sins, uttered by each one of us. An all-encompassing acrostic of the transgressions we have committed. *We live out our best selves when we acknowledge that we are imperfect human beings.*

*Ki vayom hazeh y'chapeir aleichem*--"For on this day atonement shall be made for you to purify you from all your wrongs. And pure you shall be in the presence of Adonai."<sup>10</sup> *We live out our best selves when we make right the wrongs we have committed--with God, with one another, with ourselves. We live our best selves when we own the fact that that we are deserving of forgiveness and starting anew. We live out our best selves when we accept that we don't need to forever carry the burden of every sin so long as we did the work of repentance and repair.*

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<sup>9</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 18

<sup>10</sup> *Mishkan HaNefesh*, p. 45, Leviticus 16:30

*U'tshuva u'tfillah u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa hagzeirah*, Repentance Prayer, and Righteous Giving temper the harshness of the decree.

*We live out our best selves by committing ourselves to teshuvah, to returning to who we are and what we have done, to reviewing our successes and shortfalls, and to improving in the areas where we are lacking.*

*We live out our best selves by committing ourselves to t'fillah, prayer, to nourishing and centering ourselves spiritually.*

*We live out our best selves by committing to tzedakah, righteous giving, by building ourselves a legacy through fulfilling the mitzvah of supporting those in need.*

No, *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* will not prevent us from dying of cancer, from getting struck by an oncoming vehicle, or from a failing heart.

But the actions of returning and review, of spiritual nourishment, and of giving to others will significantly impact how we *feel* about the life we are living. We will be closer to being at peace *with exiting the world* if we know that we used the time we had extraordinarily well.

“These two men are laying down their lives in mankind’s most noble goal: the search for truth and understanding.

They will be mourned by their families and friends; they will be mourned by their nation; they will be mourned by the people of the world; they will be mourned by a Mother Earth that dared send two of her sons into the unknown.

In their exploration, they stirred the people of the world to feel as one; in their sacrifice, they bind more tightly the brotherhood of man.”

We must ask ourselves on *Yom Kippur*, are we doing everything we can to merit a eulogy like *this* one. If our lives are cut short will people be able to write of us that we pursued greatness, that we will be missed, and that we made a difference in this world?

**Yom Kippur demands that we commit to doing the thinking about what will, and putting in place the tools necessary to, allow ourselves to die well.**

**By a show of hands, how many of you in this space have a will?**

**Put your hands down.**

**By a show of hands, how many of you have an advance directive?**

**Put your hands down.**

**By a show of hands, how many of you have a durable power of attorney?**

**Put your hands down.**

**By a show of hands, how many of you know what you want to happen to your body, and where you want it to go, after you die?**

**Put your hands down.**

**Last one, by a show of hands, how many of you are really uncomfortable that I'm asking you these questions?**

**Put your hands down.**

**We are interested in living vibrant, healthy lives. But we are far less interested in coming to terms with the fact that our lives will end.**

Merrill Lynch and Age Wave published a study that showed nearly half of those over 55 have not created a will and only 18 percent of those 55 and older have all three: a will, a health care directive, and a durable power of attorney.<sup>11</sup>

Why should we do these things?

For those who have lost loved ones and managed estates, you truly know the difference that having these measures in place can make.

After losing her father and watching her colleagues lose significant numbers of loved ones in a condensed period of time, Michelle Knox, a project and change professional, reflected in a TED Talk:

“Life would be a lot easier to live if we talked about death now while we’re healthy. For most of us we wait until we’re too emotional, too ill, or too physically exhausted. And then it’s too late.

Isn’t it time we take ownership of our finale on this earth?

So let’s get going?

Do you know what you want when you die? Do you know how you want to be remembered? Is location important? ...Do you want a religious service or an informal party?

Personally, I plan to be cremated, but given that I get seasick, I can think of nothing worse than having my ashes flung into a huge ocean swell. I’ve actually bought a plot in the rose garden next to my dad. I call it my investment property...

If you plan for your death then your survivors will know how to experience a healthy bereavement without fear or guilt of having failed to honor your legacy.”<sup>12</sup>

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiagermano/2019/02/15/despite-their-priorities-nearly-half-of-americans-over-55-still-dont-have-a-will/#5bfd29c85238>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/michelle\\_knox\\_talk\\_about\\_your\\_death\\_while\\_you\\_re\\_still\\_healthy?language=en#t-211844](https://www.ted.com/talks/michelle_knox_talk_about_your_death_while_you_re_still_healthy?language=en#t-211844)

*Yom Kippur* demands us to look death in the face and ask ourselves, “Have I done everything I can so that I can die on my own terms and so that my loved ones are able to fulfill my dying wishes with no regrets?”

If you can’t answer yes to this, if you don’t have a plan for what happens to your body after you die, if you don’t have a will, a health directive, and a durable power of attorney, *Yom Kippur*, our rehearsal for death, is a really good time to start putting those in place.

Just like we used to replace our smoke alarm batteries on January 1st of each year, just in case, *Yom Kippur* can be our time each year to review our documents on how we want to die, just in case. To make sure they still hold true. To make any edits that are necessary. After all, our wishes change over time.

Who shall live?

We will.

What do you need to change live well?

Who shall die?

We will.

What do you need to put in place to die well?

*Yom Kippur* is our rehearsal for death.

And *Sukkot*, which begins on Sunday evening, is also known as *Zman Simchateinu*, our time of rejoicing.

In our fragile *sukkot*, our fragile huts, representing our temporary existence, we can rejoice in the fact that we made it through this taste of death.

We can rejoice in the fact that we (re)committed ourselves to living our best lives.

We can rejoice in the fact that we have put the tools in place to die well.

And *then* we can focus on the joy of the *temporary* stroll we are on.

*Gmar Chatimah Tovah*, May You Be Sealed for Goodness--for however long that may be.