

“Death Café for Cutie”

*Yom Kippur – Yizkor
Neil F. Blumofe
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*Congregation Agudas Achim Austin, Texas -- Facebook page (Yom Kippur Morning Service):
2:29:47-2:57:48*

A number of years ago, I was leading Yom Kippur services at CAA right here in this sanctuary. In the middle of the prayers, I suddenly felt a lightness of being and for a few moments, I felt that I was having an out-of-body experience, certainly an altered sense of self. While it was unnerving, I saw myself continue to pray, and my consciousness connected with a feeling of unmitigated calm. After a few moments, the disembodied feeling passed and I was back in my body again, however, I felt that I had had a significant experience – one so profound that I can conjure it to this day: that I had made terms with my mortality, and that a part of me was reconciled with my death. It was a deeply transformative experience and it has informed my leadership in our community in all of the years since.

With one obvious flaw, Yizkor on Yom Kippur is a perfect time to set up a death café in our sanctuary. Death cafes are gatherings that have gained momentum in the last 15 years. It’s a time when people gather for moderated conversations, to speak openly about death with no set agenda, objective, or commercial purpose. The problem with that today is that an integral part of the café is the food that is served – sometime tea and cake, sometimes something else. But today, on Yom Kippur, unfortunately, our cupboard is bare.

These cafes are meant to break the social taboo surrounding death and are to encourage us to make the most of our fleeting moments. Specifically on Yizkor, if we can remember those who give us inspiration, joy, and love we can honor them and also be better suited to draw upon our own resources to positively influence others as well. To remember someone well after their death invites us to regard ourselves with compassion and generosity as well as we assess our own life. We are more able to express our thoughts about our own life, as we consider the lives and deaths of the ones that we have cherished, thus reducing our fear.

So, ma nishtanah. How is a Death Café on Yom Kippur different from all other Death Cafes? Without snacking we can permit ourselves to go as deeply as can.

At its best, how does Yizkor invite us to communicate with our loved ones, with the ones that we fondly remember who are now beyond this world? How does our awareness of mortality affect the way that we live and how we live in relationship with others? In this sacred time, can we see, can we visualize the ones who have passed? Judaism does not take kindly to séances. In fact, attempting to contact the dead, necromancy, or *doresh hametim* in Hebrew, is forbidden in traditional Judaism. This morning, we aren't going to try to communicate with the dead. Instead, we are going to explore what it means to carry on a conversation with their memory.

As our sages teach: *whoever looks at the following four matters, it would be better for them never to have entered this world at all. What is above us and what is below us. What was before creation, and what will be after the end of this world. Anyone who has no concern for the honor of their own Creator deserves never to have come into this world.* Instead, Judaism teaches us to diligently say the Kaddish, perform good deeds, and to visit the gravesites of those whom we hold dear.

And yet, Yom Kippur is a day beyond any day in our lives. It is a day when we practice for our death, when we rehearse our leave taking from this world. Yom Kippur gives us permission to approach the thing we normally avoid – our mortality. To do this is unfamiliar and can fill us with dread and foreboding. But it can also animate us, and make us more alive. Today, the veil that insulates us and separates us from the cosmic roar does flicker a bit. We are to gain a perspective, even briefly, that goes beyond our customary understanding of how we live and manage to get by in the world. Today, we catch a glimpse of the vastness of this world and of this universe beyond this world. We feel our minuteness and our finitude, and also strangely, the majesty of our brief significance. Today we have a day pass to the larger universe, when we can open ourselves to questions and possibilities beyond our everyday.

Our goal this morning is to reduce fear, coming to terms with our mortality and eventual death, allowing us to live more fully and to demystify a sometimes haunted present. Most days we exist at a false summit, thinking that we are as high up as we can go. We set goals in this world and try to achieve them, appreciating the rewards that come with our efforts. And on a day like today, Yom Kippur, we realize that there is a height higher than the one we usually

acknowledge, that our normal lives, as thrilling as they sometime are, can make us mistake what is urgent for what is important. Today we are to acknowledge something beyond what we usually admit. Today we are to push our limits and reach a higher peak.

So we will take a few moments now to drop into some of the essential questions asked at a Death Café. Let our eyes soften for a few moments, letting our gaze relax. In our seats, let us do a brief body scan, feeling the soles of our feet as they meet the floor. Noticing the energy from our feet arise past our ankles, filling our calves until the energy expands across our knees. How grateful we are for our body. We take a gentle breath, and then another, noticing the fullness of our upper legs and then our hips and how we support our lower body. As we gently close our eyes, we can feel the tips of our fingers on our thighs, and we notice our fingers, wrists, and arms. A warmth passes upward into our shoulders, and then across our collarbones into our neck.

Now let the energy move sweetly in two directions, filling our chest and our heart and our torso as we notice our jaw. Such strength. Let us relax our jaw and feel the fullness of our lips, cheeks, and nose as this energy gently passes over our eyes, our eyebrows, into our forehead and that sits comfortably on the crown of our head. Let us hold this energy here as we raise our heads slightly and squarely in our hearts as well. Bring your hands to your heart to feel your essential energy there as well. Head. Heart. Hands. We give thanks for all that we are, in this form, on this day.

Now, let all of this energy come together in your hands that are over your heart. As your fingers fill up, spread them out against each other, and then gently turn your palms outward. Let your energy begin to fill the space around you. Feel the positive energy offered by others around you, and have our collective energies fill this sacred space.

As we have found our rootedness, take a few more intentional breaths in and out. In your minds' eye, see yourself sitting at a table. You are in a café. Here, there is cozy refinement. Above you, there are sparkling chandeliers and around you there are large, arched windows that let in soft light. This beautiful midmorning light is reflected by aged mirrors on the walls. See the table before you. It is small with a polished white marble top, resting on brass pedestals. The chair you

are in is comfortable. Plush, upholstered violet velvet. Let your body sink into this chair with satisfaction. In your mind's eye, see the dark hardwood floor that supports your feet. The walls are made of wood paneling, there are newspaper racks near the entrance holding daily papers from around the world. And before you, near the counter there are beautiful display cases showcasing rich, appetizing pastries. For later.

There is an empty chair next to you. As you see the soft light, as you hear the sounds in this café – soft music, the scrape of chairs, the tinkling of silverware against china, light laughter, hushed conversation, the sounds of service, can you see someone coming to visit you? Perhaps we are already dead, and someone from the future is observing Yizkor for us. Who might it be? What might they ask us? As our sages taught: we can be asked how we kept busy in this world. Our interests, our hobbies, our accomplishments. But bottom line: did you cultivate an awareness of heaven, did you cultivate a rapport with God? Have you? Can you still?

This is a doorknob moment. What do we essentially, still need to say? What peace do we need to make? The person here to visit you, patiently waits for what you need to whisper. The dress code in the café is white. In fact, it's shroud-chic. We blink our eyes, and the soft light has become twilight. If this is our last day before the café closes, before we move beyond this world, what action would you take? What argument would you drop? What hand would you hold? What do we know is meaningless? What false summit have we stuck our flag into? We hear clearly from the one sitting with us now: *why are you wasting your time? Why are you squandering your power and your light, on narishkeit?* What is irreducibly you? What are your lasting qualities when the titles, the acquisitions, the wealth, and all the stuff have gone?

See yourself in this café, among the tables. Each person here is carrying a dynamic network of vibrant threads connecting them to everyone whose life they will touch and to everyone who will remember them after they are gone. What kind of people will they become because of what they have learned from us? What they have learned to do, and what they have learned not to do, because of our example, tempering both their embarrassment and their impatience with us, especially as we grow older? At the end of your life, what does dignity mean to

you? Has the perspective of the inevitability of your death changed as you've gotten older? Breathe.

Slowly open your eyes. Scan this beautiful sanctuary. See the mix of people, these incredible souls, all looking to connect. Breathe, again, with intention. In a moment, we will take a few minutes to gather in small groups, to discuss the following three questions. As a group, choose one question and stay with it. If the conversation naturally moves to another question, follow it. Refer to the sheet of questions that you may have in front of you. We will have about ten minutes:

1. How does knowing that we will die change the way that we live?
2. What would it mean to you to make peace with your own mortality?
3. What about death have you been curious to talk about but rarely have the opportunity to discuss?

Please engage with the people near you – either your family, friends, or new people. Take these questions seriously, and have fun with them. You don't have to tell a story about someone you've lost. You don't have to share anything that you don't want to share. You can speak philosophically, humorously, personally – or you can simply listen. Listening does count as participation. So, let's begin.

(Pause)

(Niggun)

As we return to the sanctuary, reflect on what you have heard and how you have shared. What are some new awarenesses that are presently top of mind? In this remembrance, in this discussion, how have you become more alive? As you reflect on your own mortality, can you give gratitude for Yom Kippur for this opportunity to push the boundaries and for a moment to consider that there is something above and something below? We don't summon the dead. We remember them. And in remembering them, we allow their lives to continue to shape the living. Can we cultivate a spiritual strength as we reflect on those who have given us life and taught us important things? Can we be reassured that we are doing the best that we can, with those who encounter us, as we continue to shape the living? Breathe in again. We are back in our bodies. Return to your life with greater awareness and gratitude. Now, with a full heart and a grateful heart as we move into our prayers for Yizkor, let us give gratitude for our imperfect,

everyday, singular life and for all of the yearning, brokenness and joy that we hold
as so much else slips too soon through our fingers.