

A JEWISH APPROACH TO DEATH

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

As a supplement to our recent discussion on the Jewish approach towards suffering, we include an article written by Mrs. Leah Kohn several years ago, upon the death of Rabbi Yitzchak Kirzner z'tl. In the article, Mrs. Kohn explores her own process of coming to terms with the loss of someone who touched not only her own life, but the lives of many. She also looks at the source of Rabbi Kirzner's personal strength.

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By Mrs Leah Kohn

For four years it was my privilege to work with Rabbi Yitzchak Kirzner, my coordinator at the Jewish Renaissance Center in Manhattan. He was brilliant and kind and funny - all the things that make us cherish a person. He was a mentor to literally thousands - students, coworkers and many others with whom he came into contact. The death of someone close - especially if that person is very young - is bewildering. How are we to understand such an event? How are we to cope with our anguish for the young family Rabbi Kirzner left behind? How are we to deal with our pain?

I won't attempt to deal here with the issue of why good people suffer, a classic topic that deserves its own dedicated study. Rather, I would like to discuss the Jewish approach to death - the way our tradition teaches us to view and cope with personal tragedies of this proportion.

Several years ago, I learned that Rabbi Kirzner had a melanoma - cancer of the most deadly variety. Virtually no one else knew. My husband and I had to know, because we were working with Rabbi Kirzner and he would be away for treatments and unable to teach for weeks at a time. Rabbi Kirzner asked us not to discuss his condition with anyone.

The news of his illness shocked me. I came home that day dumbfounded. I said to my husband, "How? How could God want to take away a person so important to so many? I'm not even asking how God could allow such a wonderful person to suffer, but from my own selfish viewpoint, how could such a person be taken away?"

A person can spend a lifetime studying the wisdom in just one book of Jewish knowledge. Yet, in this world at least, there are areas beyond our vision, concepts and events we can't figure out. Sometimes it's our very inability that makes us realize God's greatness. Certainly, Rabbi Kirzner privately struggled to figure out what God was doing to him. I was not privy to those struggles, but one thing was evident: rather than weakening him they gave him awesome strength and, at the

same time, a tremendous trust in God.

A year later, Rabbi Kirzner was scheduled to deliver an evening lecture. That day he had received biopsy results which were not good. The topic of Rabbi Kirzner's lecture that night was prayer. He spoke about prayers that are answered and prayers that are not answered. His delivery was so cogent, so smooth, that no one in the audience would have guessed his terrible secret. He said that in truly hard times when we try everything humanly possible to help ourselves, yet still feel events are beyond our control, we must not just pray to God, but throw ourselves on Him. We should tell God, "I'm yours. I know you love me, and I can trust you implicitly. You are doing whatever is best for me, and I'm throwing myself on You."

Rabbi Kirzner's strength was apparent in his calm that evening, as well as on a day to day basis. For three years he underwent agonizing chemotherapy, yet none of his students or colleagues suspected he was ill. Although he missed teaching for weeks at a time, he always returned to class with the same delicious wit, the same calm disposition, the same hopefulness in what life has to offer.

On the Friday morning he died, I myself was shocked by the news, even though I knew all along that only a miracle would save him. Towards the end, it should have been plain to me what was coming. Yet his dedication to life and his refusal to succumb to depression had swept me along.

I struggled through my own feelings of injustice when I heard the news. Rabbi Kirzner had helped so many. How could this be fair? The answer is, it's not fair - if your measuring stick is life in this world only. Reality for all of us is our everyday lives. Intellectually, we know there is life after life, but this awareness does not participate in our daily reality. In truth, life here is only a preparation for life after life.

How is it a preparation? The kind of life we live here creates the afterlife we will receive after death. We are not passive players - we actively shape our eternity through thoughts, deeds and our desire to connect with the eternal. Certainly, for Rabbi Kirzner who created moment to moment goodness, the afterlife is a place of spiritual pleasure unimaginable to us.

We might wonder whether he could have earned a better eternity if only he'd had more time here. Not so. Our earnings in the World to Come are based solely on the degree to which we actualize our potential. Quality rather than quantity of deeds is the measure. All factors are taken into account, including how we overcome life's difficulties.

Each Jew is uniquely precious to God. We have different talents and circumstances, because we each have a different mission in life - a unique aspect of Godliness to contribute. In many cases, a short lifespan indicates a mission accomplished.

There's a famous story by the Chazon Ish, a pious man and great Torah scholar, who lived in Israel about thirty five years ago. Bedridden at the end of his life, he studied and even taught from his bed.

One day, when a married couple and their child who had Down's syndrome came for a blessing, the Chazon Ish stood up as they entered. After the family left, his startled students asked whether he had stood up to honor the parents for their exhausting efforts with the child. The Chazon Ish said no - he had stood to honor the child.

The Chazon Ish's reply was an eye-opener. Jewish tradition teaches us that almost all of us alive today have been here before in a different incarnation. We return to this world in order to complete our missions. Each time we return, we're given what we need - intellect, communal support, health, money - to finish our task. If a person such as a disabled child is born with limited resources, it means he has little to accomplish. In his previous life, he all but accomplished what his soul had set out to do in the first place. "That is why I stood," said the Chazon Ish.

So from the point of view of the person who has finished his mission, death is neither negative or a punishment. Our sages describe death as, "a night between two days," a passage from one stage of life to another, from finite to infinite.

But what about those of us left here? How do we deal with our grief? It's not easy, but our task is to trust that God will never leave us alone. Individuals leave, but God is always here for us, and He blesses us with the ability to form new attachments in this world. There are no substitutes for those we have loved and lost, but there are new routes for our love to follow. While adjusting to loss is difficult, we know that God continues to provide for our needs.

We must learn from death the meaning and purpose of life. What should we dedicate ourselves to? The night before Rabbi Kirzner entered the hospital for the last time, he made an appointment to meet with a stranger who had heard a few of his lectures on tape and felt that a half hour with the rabbi would do him good. Rabbi Kirzner did not mention his illness. Where did he find the will to deal with a stranger's problems at a time when he could have been justifiably preoccupied? Herein lies the remarkable message of Judaism. "I am alive! Thank God I have time to accomplish something!" In his final moments, Rabbi Kirzner continued to live in his matchless way.

God loves us to a degree no human can match or comprehend. In this supreme love, He often presents us with opportunities for growth that from our perspective seem painful. We can only struggle to accept the ultimate good beyond our limited understanding of God's plan.

The Chiddushei HaRim, a renowned nineteenth century chassidic rabbi, lived through a tremendous personal tragedy. His daughter died just days after the birth of her ninth child. On hearing of her death the rabbi said, "Only the Master of Mercy can cause such pain." Master of mercy. This is the essence of the Jewish approach to suffering. We trust that an act of God's love is sometimes painful and hard to comprehend. This faith empowers us to move on in life and to learn profound lessons from life's most difficult moments.

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