

Tonight,  
confronting the anticipated close in less than 24 hours-time  
of that metaphoric Book of Life,  
we could easily fall prey to the penitential pressure...  
If it's all up for grabs,  
what last minute life-adjustments might we make?

Vows to change our ways...

Promises to open our hearts...

Pledges to make old wrongs right.

Anything we could do or say so as to stamp our seal, and see our way clear to  
another year. BUT...[Spoiler Alert] the *Bargain*, it turns out, is a bust!

Our ability to alter the course of life tomorrow

Will not be due to striking a deal with the Divine,

As if God is the high stakes dealer who knows just how the deck is stacked,

But rather will be the result of our figuring out what this life, as we aim to live it,  
is all about.

And at the core, that means peeling back the metaphor,

Discovering the truth about the reality we effectively deny

Every other day of the year, but which this day undeniably puts front and  
center—Death... Which, ironically,

is the only way we can ever come to learn the secret of our immortality.

As a breeding ground for the world's most successful and entrepreneurial,  
of all the Silicon Valley investors looking to find the "next big thing,"  
None could be "bigger" than those seeking to solve the "problem" of Death.  
Companies like CALICO—acronym for California Life Company,  
a biotech GOOGLE subsidiary, is among the firms probing the aging process in  
hopes of combatting, or even conquering it!

With a Who's WHO of billionaire backers from high-tech to Hollywood,  
the stated goal of most of these ventures merge in a phrase:

"making death optional."

"There are now people," writes Arielle Arieff [Sunday NY Times Op-Ed, 8.18.18] who refer to  
themselves as "longevity entrepreneurs," people who see death not as a problem  
but rather as something to be eliminated."

Pioneer in the field over the past two decades, Dr. Aubrey DeGrey,  
Chief Science Officer of the SENS Research Foundation, pushing what he  
terms "Robust Human Rejuvenation," has developed a taxonomy, offering a  
biotech fix for the seven types of physical damage and decay which, sooner  
than later, he insists, should put us on a path to living till 1,000.

And though DeGrey has aged considerably over these past 15 years

of video-conferences and Ted Talks, the British hippie cross  
between a mad-scientist & a used car salesman is a bit over the top in his pitch:

*“Humanity has been suckered rather often. People simply don’t want to  
hear our message. So let’s just believe that aging is a complete  
inevitability, make our peace, and get on with our miserably short lives.”*

Advocates and investors offer what amounts to an alternate life-philosophy,  
as Oracle co-founder Larry Ellison said, reflecting on his mother’s passing  
when he was just in college, “Death has never made any sense to me.”

Chiming in, PayPal mega-Magnate Peter Thiel,

Sounding to me a lot like Captain Obvious, did not hide his feelings:

“Almost every human being who has ever lived is dead...Solving this problem  
is the most natural, humane and important thing we could possibly do.”

Beyond the obvious incentive, that a bunch of billionaire backers have  
literally billions of reasons to want to keep on living indefinitely,

Theoretically speaking, this “next big thing”

life over death battle juxtaposes two competing paths,

As a feature article in the New Yorker framed it:

“a battle between HEALTH-SPANNERS, using the power of evolution as  
ordained by nature, and IMMORTALISTS, harnessing the power of evolution  
as ordained by humankind.” [“Silicon Valley’s Quest to Live Forever,” New Yorker, 4.3.17]

Of course, far as we’re concerned, there’s one key factor missing,  
Which throws even the most advanced algorithmic minds into a frenzy.  
For with Silicon Valley-fueled futurists posing what they’d regard  
as the most essential, progressive question/just the right question:  
“WHAT if there were a pill we could take that could cure our mortality?”  
From our Yom Kippur vantage point,  
Seeking the perspective that will fill our New year with LIFE,  
For God’s Sake, let’s hope there is not.

Normally, I never read novels.

My down-time is taken up with professional R & D,

Mostly academic—Jewish/Religious/Socio-historic-cultural trends,

Or combing through the core-texts to bring Torah to life.

But every once in a blue moon a book comes along

Which is both sacred story & faith-challenge,

That seems meant to be shared...meant for a moment.

...Eternal Life by nationally acclaimed, award-winning novelist Dara Horn

Is all about Rachel, a woman with a problem both vexing and profound:

She cannot die.

...Originally, daughter of the leading scribe of his day  
Two thousand years ago in Roman-ruled Jerusalem,  
Rachel, to save her baby-son, who is mysteriously withering away, dying,  
After all else fails, makes the only vow the High Priest knows  
will be powerful enough to prevent it.  
As they stand alone in the shadow of the Holy Altar, the High Priest explains:  
“I am speaking of an eternal vow. This vow will make you die without dying.  
If you make this vow, your son will live, but so will you.”  
Rachel stared at him: “I don’t understand?”  
“Your son will survive this illness but there is a price...a sacrifice  
Which must come from you.”  
She drew in her breath, “What do you mean?”  
The High Priest looked at the ground, “The price is your death.”  
“I would gladly die for my son,” she said.  
Touching the red stone on his breastplate, the High Priest replied:  
“No—you will live for him.”  
Then as if struggling to form the words, Hanania the HP continued:  
“To make this vow you must live for all your children—forever.  
You must sacrifice your own death for your son to live.”  
She looked deep into the black of his eyes.  
“It means your child will live, but you will never die.”  
What might it mean to actually live forever?

As the protagonist in Horn’s novel makes painfully clear,  
Experiencing unspeakable deaths at the hands of historic oppressors and  
nameless hoodlums, only to be thrown back into life again;  
placed in a new setting, with a new family,  
nurturing and raising a new generation only to outlive them...  
Could there be a more torturous existence  
than such a sentence to Eternal Life?  
By book’s end, wanting nothing more than to leave this life  
and not begin again, as Rachel—in her current incarnation,  
a 21<sup>st</sup> century 85 year-old Jewish Grandma,  
Shares her two-thousand-year-old secret with her granddaughter Hannah,  
A research doctor in chromosomal life-extension,  
One truth appears tantamount:  
It is not our search for eternity  
But our facing up to mortality  
That gives life its inherent purpose  
and endows it with lasting value.

With Kol-Nidrei calling all bets for tomorrow off,  
It is only by our sensing the imminent invincibility of death this day, every day,  
That we can become aware enough to grasp the power of life  
As it enables an immortality available to us all.

Our frame is a prayer we all know too-well: UNETANEH TOKEF,  
The liturgical litany which paints the picture of the many way we can leave this  
life, but, for our purposes, with a twist.

Rather than the traditional High Holy Day text,  
Let famed singer/composer Leonard Cohen's lyric provide fitting perspective.

[Read antiphonally by two LT teens]

The haunting question Cohen frames as his refrain,  
*"And Who shall I say is calling?"* was noted by *Rolling Stone Magazine*  
as the author's "agnostic query." But maybe not.

Perhaps Cohen poses the question so it can become our quest,  
As he, himself, said shortly after writing it: [1979]

*"The conclusion is what makes the song into a prayer for me,  
"Who shall I say is calling?" Who is it, or what is it, that determines who will live,  
who will die, and how? What is the source of the great furnace of creation? Who  
lights it? Who extinguishes it?"* [The Song of Leonard Cohen, 1979]

Death will not be denied. *"Who by brave assent—Who by accident."*  
It comes for us all. So, with limited-time a given,  
what sparks of spirit will we bring to ignite our life flame?  
For though death may be [largely] beyond us, life is in our hands,  
To make what we will, to do all we can, to fuel that furnace;  
and so, answer the call...

With so many who left us since the Book of Life last lay open,  
I'd remember three who modeled a life of deep meaning,  
Each leaving a legacy shining so bright,  
the radiance that remains helps us not alone  
to perceive Eternal Life in a whole new light, but likewise,  
to see how it is we might live a life that's "Forever."

- I. When Anthony Bourdain died, I was devastated. To be sure,  
because of how he left, but even more, because of what he left...  
Culinary master, media "rock-star" through his world-travels tv shows,  
From *A Cook's Tour* [Food Network] to *No Reservations* [Travel Channel]  
to *Parts Unknown* [CNN] what made Bourdain so unique?  
Ironically, not the talent which became his primary profession.

For much as his kitchen mastery linked him to culinary experts/cuisine  
across the globe, it was his desire to use the table as a meeting ground,  
To reveal parts unknown, not simply ingredients in a dish  
But sentiments of the heart.

He could be sitting across from a tenth-generation family from Libya,  
Or Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale in the Bay Area,  
Or even President Barack Obama in Vietnam...

With food as the backdrop, the socio-political was always on the menu.  
As Northeastern's Prof. of Communication Sarah Jackson affirmed:  
"We lost a man who brilliantly and bravely wove political education into  
food culture in a way that provided the kind of historical context and  
compassion for the oppressed that America needs now more than ever."

[NY Times, 6.11.18]

And you needn't be anyone famous...

Eating Tibetan dumplings with a couple of community organizers,  
Bourdain asks the one who just spoke at a Diversity Rally in Astoria,  
"Why do you care so much?"

Listening to a second-generation Far Rockaway resident worried about the  
gentrification that may push out regular old neighborhood folks,  
Bourdain truly feels their pain.

From Ethiopia to Armenia, to the City's outer boroughs,  
He heard the human struggle that links us all on the life-journey.

As his voiceover signed off just this year  
of an episode of Parts Unknown: Queens:

*"Every meal, every dish, has a story. When somebody cooks for you,  
they are saying something; they are telling you something about  
themselves... Where they come from, who they are, what makes them happy. A  
whole helluva lot of people in Queens who make it such a great place to eat  
and explore are very far from the place they once called home. But, thanks to  
them, Queens is now home."*

With utmost respect for the stories we tell through the steps of our lives,  
Anthony Bourdain heard the humanity, always aware, he was part of it. He  
tasted the heart with every bite. He asked the hard questions.

And he had the courage to listen. For Bourdain knew that when we sit at  
someone's table, eating and talking life,  
it provides a nourishment that makes that place home...

Even though he's gone, his legacy still brings his light to life.

- II. Having died in hospital of heart trouble at 85,  
When Phillip Roth was laid to rest on May 30<sup>th</sup> at Bard College cemetery,  
Prototypical to the six decades of his literary legacy,

His final parting was without a stitch of Jewish rite or ritual.  
If you've read any Roth classics, most significantly Portnoy's Complaint or Goodbye Columbus, you can't be at all surprised.

For at the center of Phillip Roth's life work was the struggle with Jewish Identity as it confronted post-WWII suburbanization, Raising the core question: What makes us who we are?

The most auspicious American writer of his age, in his mid-20's and nationally celebrated, Roth caricatured a country-club, materialistic Jewish establishment of the 1960's [THINK—The Graduate] which enabled him to challenge the hypocrisy of those who made assimilation their highest aspiration, knowing, all along, they'd never let us in.

Ironically, it was the flagship Orthodox Yeshiva university's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Literary Symposium in 1962

That affirmed Roth's place as the lightning rod of a Jewish culture Identity storm.

Having just won the National Book Award for Goodbye Columbus, Roth was roundly attacked during the Q & A by Y.U. faculty members, who suggested that his stories of unethical, unobservant, unseemly Jews would stoke anti-Semitism and lead to further Jewish self-hatred.

Countering that claim in an essay the following year, Roth [as always] went for the jugular:

*"IF there are Jews who've begun to find the stories that novelists tell more provocative and pertinent than the sermons of their rabbis, perhaps it is because there are regions of feeling and consciousness which cannot be reached by the oratory of self-congratulations and self-pity."* ["Writing About Jews," 1963]

For the majority of his writing career, Roth challenged the sacred status quo, In a manner that actually cleared the path for us as progressive Jews, Searching for the questions that would push us towards authenticity.

But Phillip Roth was a cultural catalyst, not just for the Jews, but the entire country. As his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, American Pastoral attests, chronicling the mythic rise & fall of one man's fortunes, Roth reflects the struggles of the 80's & 90's as they brought into question the reality and reachability of the American Dream.

Ever true to his mission, no matter the novel or short story or article, Roth called the high ground of our most cherished assumptions to question. And even with his death, the breadth of his life-work still fuels the furnace, Sparking inspiration and at times sending lightning rods...

- To anyone who presumes life is intended to be coherent...
- To anyone whose indiscretions seem inconsistent...

- To any of us who think they know God's Will...
- Or any of us, as Jews, who believe we are somehow better...
- To those who have a tendency to be somewhat self-absorbed
- Or any of us who've lost part of ourselves along life's way...

Even though he's gone ... ringing true because he's talking to you,  
 Every time we read them,  
 Phillip Roth's words still bring his light to life.

### III. The call came

Just as I was about to walk down the aisle and officiate at a wedding.  
 "What do you mean, he died?"

When someone leaves this life in an instant,  
 Someone so vibrantly alive one minute and gone the next,  
 Disbelief is the go-to... "How could that be?"

Rabbi Aaron Panken,

President of HUC-JIR was just 53!

Doing what he so loved, soaring in the sky in his antique plane,  
 He died tragically when it crashed shortly after takeoff,  
 Saturday, May 5<sup>th</sup>—an otherwise bright, beautiful day.

For his wife Lisa,

His kids, Eli & Samantha,

His sister Melinda, his parents Peter & Beverly,

For every member of the Messenger-Panken family,

The loss is beyond words—inexplicable...impossible.

The void is vast...Without his presence, the impact of his absence,  
 Life will never be the same.

What we know, however...

What I can say with the saddest certainty

Is that in the face of such tragic, untimely death, a legacy survives...

For Aaron's family, that is a legacy of love,

Sustaining, unwavering...A love that cannot/will not die.

And for the Reform Jewish world of which he was such a dynamic leader,

For his HUC family, it is a legacy that lives in a vision he made real

as President of the College-Institute these past 4 years.

Having taught his specialty, Second Temple literature at HUC

As early as 1995 when he was just finishing his Ph.D.,

And still a congregational rabbi,

he was thereafter appointed Dean of the NY School,

As Rabbi Larry Hoffman said, "Aaron was a President waiting to happen."

As just our 12<sup>th</sup> President in the 143-year history of the Reform Movement's Leadership centerpiece, Aaron was unique.

A trained engineer who saw potential solutions where others saw only problems, he did not simply espouse a vision; he *was* the vision.

And because, for all of us,

He was a teacher whose quirky, creative, absolutely brilliant mind brought the text to life in ways that ever touched our hearts,

His "Torah" still echoes...

From his D'var on Chayei Sarah this past Fall: In Aaron's own words:

*"Merely imagining the scene of all our days and acts parading before God should give us pause, and, ultimately, provide sincere motivation to live better... We who are given the gift of life no matter how short or long it happens to be, do best by imbuing its every moment with meaningful acts that are innocent and wholehearted... If we can have the strength to do so, Then we can one day face death with deeds that speak our life's goodness; Worthy, with favor... of being remembered."*

...How could I ever forget,

When Susan was in her last months of life and I was on leave from LT, Aaron offered without being asked to come teach Chevrah Torah.

Talk about a ringer!

Or years ago, seeing and schmoozing with his family every summer

On the streets of great Barrington, how he'd talk to my boys,

Geeky enough to share Sci-Fi lingo with Aaron & Alexander...

Or how he'd greet me weekly at HUC,

There to teach the Senior Seminar which he told me I had to 18 years ago.

How he'd stop for a hug with the hyperbolic words,

*"HaRav, HaGa'on, Shlita—Rabbi, Great Sage, the Honorable One."*

Aaron brought honor to every person he encountered.

He filled our world with care, because brilliant as he was,

Aaron Panken lead with kindness.

Such a gracious spirit radiates light,

long after its earthly existence is extinguished...

"WHAT is the source of the great furnace of Creation?"

Rather than getting caught in how they left,

Let their legacy remind us of all they have left...

Struggling with Eternal Life, knowing the book was "a sermon," to say the least,

I prevailed on my best friend Billy [aka, Rabbi William K. Dreskin of WCT]

To read it as well so we could confer, or, so my read on it could be confirmed.

But, as always since our days beginning 36 years ago as Rabbinic School study partners, playing counterpoint to whatever my perspective, Billy incisively turned my operative assumption on its head.  
“Jeffrey, the purpose of life is not to be remembered...  
The real purpose is to do something so worthwhile, of such lasting value,  
That the path in life you walked will be [forever] memorable.”  
In other words, ...we merit Eternity  
*Not* by how many remember us, but *what* we are remembered *for*.

Coco, the Pixar film which since its release just last year won 2 Oscars and grossed nearly a billion dollars has become most beloved, and w/good reason. The tale of 12-year-old Miguel, a boy who so wants to play music, trying to get out from under the shadow of his great-Great Grandfather who, it seems, abandoned the family to pursue a musical career, and so, a subsequent family ban on music was invoked. Coco, Miguel’s Great-Grandma is old, wheelchair bound and frail, but, the only one who, as far as her father is concerned, might still remember.  
The action revolves around “*Dia De Los Muertos—the Mexican Day of the Dead...*”  
“The one night of year, as Miguel’s Grandma explains, that our ancestors cross over...  
So, we set out the foods they loved, and lights candles alongside their pictures. And, in remembering them, we bring the family back together.”  
Problem is, Miguel, pursuing the music in his soul, ends up on the wrong side of the soft-orange marigold covered Skybridge, caught in the Land of the Dead.  
Not wanting to spoil it for you, suffice it to say that the only way Miguel can get back to life is by recovering the very real, heretofore unknown devotion His great-Great Grandfather had for the family he truly loved. Redeeming memory, Miguel makes immortality possible...  
Thus the Transcendent Takeaway...  
For if we, as Jews, have a *Dia De los Muertos*, it is this night.  
More than any other day of our year,  
the border between what we understand as death  
And what we know as life, is practically porous...

The candles are lit...The faces of those who’ve left this life,  
Radiant before us, illuminate a love which reflects their light.  
And in our remembrance, the real secret lies.  
For with past and present merged in this timeless moment,  
It is our dead who are speaking to us,  
Instructing/reminding us, through the legacy they’ve left,  
What Life Eternal is all about.

The aim is not defeating death.  
Rather, affirming its immanence, accepting its inevitability,  
Learning all it means to embrace life...  
By filling our days, by doin' our thing,  
by living with value-added  
and so, leaving a legacy that will be meritorious as it is memorable...

The legacies of those we so love and miss are whispering:

- Feed people whether you know them or not as if they are family,
- Share words which help others speak the stories of their lives,
- Teach kindness by the care you give which magically opens hearts.

Death Happens...

But living a LIFE whose light is so bright that it fuels “forever,”—that is up to us...

With the gift of every today our blessing in the year to come,  
Let us live with Eternity in our hearts;  
Embracing each day as our chance to bring wonder & warmth to our world,  
Knowing, as we do, our light—like our love—will ever shine on....AMEN