

# The Severe Decree and Facing the End

Talk by Stan and Sarah Angrist

Delivered at Dor Hadash's Yom Kippur evening services on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## The Severe Decree

Part 1 by Stan Angrist

Sarah and I are honored to be asked to give a joint talk at this Kol Nidre service. I will take a somewhat scholarly approach while Sarah's viewpoint will be more personal.

Some of you might be surprised to see me giving a talk entitled "The Severe Decree" on Yom Kippur, our holiest day in the year. I am a little bit surprised myself since most of my talks are not 100% serious. And I might have some trouble keeping this one serious.

I was motivated to give this talk for several reasons. First, in the last few years we have lost several good friends to death. These are people we enjoyed spending time with, learning from and laughing with and we miss them sorely. Second, as I age and move past the point where the time remaining to me is much less than the time I have lived, it is natural to think about the next big thing.

People who study jokes say that the two topics most frequently found in them are sex and death. Why? I am not sure, but it probably has to do with the fact that we don't discuss these topics openly among friends and family. So, we put our thoughts into jokes. In the case of death, the jokes might be similar to whistling as we walk past the cemetery—it helps make a scary event more palatable.

So, Mrs. Lefkowitz and Mrs. Finkelstein are talking one day and Mrs. Lefkowitz says that she and her husband have come to an understanding of what will happen when one of them dies. Mrs. Lefkowitz then explains that agreement, "Which ever one of us dies first, I'll then move to Tel Aviv." But now it's time to get serious.

As Jack Riemer points out in his book, *Wresting with the Angel*, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, has many meanings. Surely one of the most important is that it serves as an annual rehearsal for death. The whole focus of the prayers on this day is on the preciousness and the fragility of life as we contemplate "the severe decree" and which book—Life or Death in which we will be inscribed.

But our holiday prayer book says that if we practice teshuvah-repentance, tefilah-prayer and tzedakah-charity, in the coming year we can avert the severe decree.

Reconstructionism rejects the superstitious dimensions of prayer, and we do not believe either that "all is decreed" or that teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah can mitigate what may happen. But we do accept, that though many bad things are beyond our control, we do retain control over how we react to those things. Judaism recognizes that ultimately the severe decree will be imposed. We will all die. But why do we die? And what happens after we die?

We have to go much later in the biblical literature to find that the ultimate destiny of the individual does not end with death. As the late Rabbi Neil Gilman notes in his essay on eschatology in *Etz Hayim*, in the Torah human death is final. Whatever ideal an individual Israelite can hope to achieve is restricted to one's lifetime and is conditional on heeding God's commands. With the possible exception of Elijah and Enoch, all biblical personalities die and their death is final.

The Tanach, mostly in the writings of the prophets, changes this point of view. Isaiah talks of “the days to come” in which he states the prayer we say in almost every service, “Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.” He goes on to describe this period as a time when lambs shall lie down with wolves. [Some contemporary authors are skeptical of this prophecy. Woody Allen commented that lambs will indeed lie down with wolves but that the lambs won’t get much sleep.]

Rabbi Gilman explains that Isaiah says all these things will happen “in the days to come” not, as in the later tradition, “at the end of days.” The latter phrase is almost always used to describe the so-called last judgment. We Jews recite the Aleinu, the prayer that articulates Isaiah’s vision of an age of universal peace and justice under the dominion of the God of the Jewish people. Note that this is not promised to occur in heaven but on earth, in the course of history and does not require a last judgment.

Judaism celebrates life—at every holiday and in between, too. Every Jew in the world knows the expression *l’chaim*—to life. If there is one blessing that every Jew can recite by heart it is the *Shehecheyanu*, the blessing that thanks God for the gift of life.

We are a people whose central prayer on this Yom Kippur day is “Remember us for life, Supreme One who delights in life, and write us in the book of life for Your sake, Supreme One.” But on the other hand, our religion also has us say the *Yizkor* prayer tomorrow and the *Unetaneh Tokef*, the most awesome prayer of our liturgy, which says, in part, “Who will live, who will die, who by fire, who by storm, who by thirst...”

Rabbi Riemer poses the question, So, which is it? Is Judaism a religion that celebrates life or is it a religion that focuses on death? Or, is it a religion that strives somehow to hold the two—life and death—in a strange, inseparable, inextricable balance, because we cannot apprehend one without the other?

And then he answers by asserting that today, and every Yom Kippur, should be an encounter with our own mortality and ought to be a moment in which we come to terms with the reality that our life is both precious and precarious, precious because it is precarious.

If there were no death, how pointless, meaningless and endless our lives would be! Because there is death, our lives says Rabbi Riemer can be pressured and precious, brief and beautiful. The psalmist had it just right: “Teach us, O God, to number our days—and teach us how to appreciate our lives, whether they be short or long—so that we may acquire a heart of wisdom.”

And now, let’s listen to Sarah.

## **Facing the End**

Part 2 by Sarah Angrist

Stan provided a scholarly view of Yom Kippur. My view is personal and reflects thoughts about facing the end.

The coronavirus makes me think my time is coming very soon. I could be one of the bodies on a gurney with no way to get to the cemetery. Since it happened in New York, it could happen in Pittsburgh. Not a desirable way to reach the plots that await us in Homewood Cemetery. Nor

will I relish the end in a hospital where my family cannot come to send me off with hugs and words.

The reckless folks going maskless in crowds are my enemy and everyone else's. The stealthy bugs hiding in their bodies are ready to float silently into mine. Those mystery bugs are everywhere and anywhere, carefully hidden. Yet they are ready to hitch a free ride to sickness, even death.

What is it all about, the end we fear? I have had such a colorful, challenging, and action-packed life, and I am blessed with a wonderful family. So I am always hoping for a noble, easy ending, quiet and pain free. I yearn to go like my friend Roslyn. I could say goodbye in her living room, hold her hand, and cry together over sweet memories.

True, death is not new to me. My mother departed without me because I lived far away. She died unexpectedly in Montreal at age 60, too young by today's standards. My anguish was palpable—I felt like an orphan at age 30, with failure to comprehend. My father and favorite uncle each lingered a few weeks with lung cancer, so we did have some time together. They could not be saved; there were no powerful treatments at that time. My brother takes me to their graves in the crowded cemetery. We share those losses, while he has even more graves to visit, and more tears to shed.

Stan and I witnessed the departure of his mother at age 99. I sat with her as death approached, thinking about how we came to love each other despite years of friction. Recalling that she had resisted my marriage to her son, she uttered the apology I still cherish. She said: "I could have ruined a good marriage."

Between family and friends, many are the funerals and shivahs in which I participated. The Jewish way of dying warms my heart despite the sadness and loss. That's the way I want for myself, yet Covid-19 may make it impossible.

Today, can anyone have a funeral? In good times, the formal service encompasses the world of the deceased. Yet that may not be possible. If I had my druthers, I'd choose the *shivah* period after the funeral—it is a more ordinary gathering of loved ones, family and friends, remembering the departed. As a Reconstructionist, I value belonging, in the terms used by our founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. It is the sense of community and stories about the person's life. It is the stories that make the person come alive. As Leo Tolstoy wrote: "We all die, the goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will."

Although I am not a believer, my years in Dor Hadash showed me the rich patterns of observance. I love the prayers and songs—they are poetry and music for the soul, universal in depicting human nature, society and values. Take for example, the song *Eli, Eli*, by Chana Senesh. She parachuted into Europe to try to save Hungarian Jews during World War II. She wrote the poem before she was murdered by the Nazis. She wrote: "My God, my God, I pray that these things never end. The sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens, the prayer of the heart."

At this awesome Day of Atonement, there is the *Avinu Malkenu*, reciting a cry for help. What do all of us ask? Forgiveness and atonement for transgressions, a safe and good year ahead,

inscribing in the Book of Life. All that communal *davening*, praying, creates the warmth and closeness for the mourners to share memories and bear the loss. Should I be worrying about the mourners? Well, it is up to the mourners if they wish to say Kaddish to achieve some comfort and recollection. I say this prayer for my parents, at the annual date of their death, because it provides some continuity.

My dear friend, Halina, has a better idea—party with your family and friends in order to share the joys of life. Do not wait for the end, is her philosophy. So I got to share two Santa Barbara parties in her honor at age 90 and 95—an exquisite celebration each time.

For me, it is all about quality of life, not quantity. I relish my life every day so far, but the unknown future haunts me as well. I take comfort in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who said: “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal, everything is incredible. *Never treat life casually.*”

Let me conclude for Stan and me: G'mar Chatima Tova. May you be inscribed in the Book of Life.