

EDITOR'S NOTE

“SO SOON?” A NAHMANIDEAN MEDITATION ON DEATH

In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.

(MARILYNNE ROBINSON, *Gilead*)

Late August for my mother, in the last decade of her life, was a time of sadness. Inevitably the day would arrive when I could no longer put off telling her that next week the university would have “meetings.” She understood that preliminary meetings were a euphemism for the inescapable advent of a new term, when I would not be as available to her as I had been during the all too short months of summer. By the last couple of years even the end of shorter breaks was hard. In my recollection of these scenes, I make the announcement standing over her—as if standing rather than sitting would make the news more casual and therefore less unwelcome. Invariably, she would look up at me and say: “Already? So soon?”

Last spring, as her strength dwindled, and her ability to function on her own became less predictable, the inexorable end of summer portended the dread awareness that this time my return to full-time teaching would require engaging full time care by strangers in my absence.

Her funeral took place on the Wednesday we read *Parashat Balak*—“May my death be the death of the righteous and my end like his.” Overcome by grief, I was at the same time overwhelmed and overawed by the circumstances of my mother's last weeks and months. She left this world in a manner so perfectly suited to the way she had conducted her life—her mind intact and giving until the last breath, still able, on the days she could totter around, of presiding proudly over her kitchen, in her own home, her last moments conscious and not solitary. Her final indelible cry—“Shulem, Shulem, Shulem,” uttered in a firm, serene tone of voice, as if she either required some particular assistance

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or deemed it important to have my attention—echoed that day and for many days after, along with my helplessly hopeful response to silent eyes that saw only what mortals cannot: “What do you want? What do you want me to do?” This final exchange filled my ears like the concluding chord of an imposing musical composition.

As weeks passed and *sheloshim* approached, the dying call and the eyes that stared past this world were joined in memory by the plaintive question and the living gaze that asked “So soon?” Too soon would the *sheloshim* come to their appointed end. I would become merely one among many mourners living through the eleven months of Kaddish. My hair would be cut. Life would be one step closer to routine. Yet the phrase “so soon,” in my mother’s voice and gaze was not only a commentary on the process of *avelut* and the strange alchemy that transforms shock and desolation into commemoration and consolation. Literally, hearing it meant that with the passage of time my mother’s departure had become to me, in some inexplicable manner, premature.

When people die young, suddenly, unprepared, it seems natural to think of death as happening too soon. What did it mean to say “so soon” about the death of a woman almost 95 years of age, who had left her affairs in exemplary order, who, not knowing the exact date of her demise, had lived each week as if it were her last, and with that end in mind, had conducted memorable and meaningful conversations with all the people who mattered to her, whose last words were not “Nurse” but “Shulem, Shulem, Shulem?” However much she continues to be missed, would the right time to die have been months or years later, eyesight progressively diminished, hearing no better, even intellectually (unthinkably) to decline, unable to be of use to herself or to others, forsaken to the attentions of strangers? She had prayed not to be abandoned in her old age, and the prayer had been answered as well as anyone might hope for.

Precisely because my mother died so full of years and full of sanity, giving of herself though her body was entirely, irrevocably spent, she posed the paradox of death in its purest philosophical form. How is it that even the most fortunate death, approximating so closely what the dying person and those who cared for her and about her would wish for, is nevertheless a tragic, shattering event that casts a dark shadow over what follows?

II

When I rose from *shiva* to rejoin the world of the living, I was also returning to the world of Torah study. After the visitors had dispersed, a *talmid* stayed behind and led me by the hand, like a convalescent taking his first unsteady steps, back into the world where other people had claims on me, and back into the world of Talmud Torah. In the following weeks, others performed the same service for me. It was thus that on Shabbat *Parashat Re'eh*, in the room adjacent to the bedroom where my mother breathed her last, we sat down to discuss Nahmanides' (Ramban's) commentary on Deuteronomy 14:1-2: "You are children of God; do not cut yourselves (*lo titgodedu*) or make any baldness between your eyes for the dead. For you are a holy people unto God."

According to Ramban, the prohibition is connected with our belief in immortality. Because we are a holy people, we should not abandon our self-control in the face of death and mutilate ourselves, even when a person dies young. But if we are to take comfort in the hope for life after death, why then does the Torah allow and even encourage the gestures of mourning?

Ramban responds:

Scripture does not forbid weeping, for nature arouses weeping at the parting of lovers and their separation even in life.

It is possible to interpret this natural weeping as a purely physiological reaction to loss, not really different in kind from the tears caused by exposure to the juice of raw onions or acrid smoke. There are Stoic philosophers, who judge emotion irrational, and dismiss such immediate uncontrolled symptoms as "first motions," reflexes of no significance to the person exhibiting them or as a regrettable weakness to which flesh and blood is vulnerable. Elsewhere, however (in the preface to *Torat ha-Adam*), Ramban is scathingly critical of philosophers who harden their hearts and deny the reality of suffering, and he is correspondingly attuned to the halakhic norms that mandate appropriate grief at the termination of human life.

Hence the implication of Ramban's words is that weeping is an appropriate response, not an excessive one, to the human experience of separation. Even if death is not the end for us, our withdrawal from the world and from those we love is poignant, says Ramban, the way even temporary parting is painful and sadness inducing.

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III

It is impossible to read this passage of Ramban without thinking of Samuel Johnson's reflection on the secret horror of endings in the last paper of his *Idler* series. Here are some of Johnson's famous lines:

There are few things not purely evil, of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, this is the last. Those who never could agree together, shed tears when mutual discontent has determined them to final separation; of a place which has been frequently visited, though without pleasure, the last look is taken with heaviness of heart. . . .

This secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited, and to whom death is dreadful. We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination; when we have done any thing for the last time, we involuntarily reflect that a part of the days allotted us is past, and that as more is past there is less remaining.

At first glance, Johnson is reminiscent of Ramban because both explore the link between death and other endings. In truth, they are moving in opposite directions. For Johnson, as a profound psychologist, the sadness of endings is puzzling, especially when we were not very attached to the person or thing or activity that is coming to its end. The horror of death, by contrast, is self-evident. The last look inspires heaviness of heart because it puts us in mind of the ultimate finality of death. Ramban, as a theological moralist, inquires why the Torah condones mourning and its characteristic behavior, and replies that death is comparable to the parting of lovers, that engenders not only the involuntary feelings of sadness and distress that haunt Johnson, but also religiously meaningful behavior like weeping. His response implies that partings, even temporary ones, leave us with a sense of very real loss, one that even anticipated reunion cannot put entirely in the shade.

One reason, perhaps the primary one, that Johnson found death so horrifying, was the fear of what comes after—the prospect of being sent to hell and its punishments. So strong was this fear that he doubted the sincerity of those who denied feeling it. Absent this fear, our culture often associates traditional religion with the welcoming of death, when we pass on to a better place, liberated from the burdens of mortal existence. This, despite the fact that religious believers, even when they are not terrified by the fear of hell, seem to take death, mourning and their

attendant rituals, much more gravely than typical secularists do. Perhaps that is because, as a rule, they take life more seriously too. Perhaps it is because we revere our progenitors and invest enormous hope in our progeny, so that the loss of one soul is equivalent to the loss of an entire world. Biblical religion, in any event, unlike the popular optimistic image of religion, views death negatively: “In Sheol who confesses God?”

Those of you familiar with R. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* know how strenuously he stressed Halakha’s distaste for death. In the Rav’s version of Biblical doctrine, death brings to naught all human activity and thus renders meaningless the human vocation. Ramban’s attempt to balance our reliance on God who “wipes the tears from every face” and the sadness and grief that brings those tears to our eyes, is very much of a piece with this vision of the human condition.

Often we define valuable human activity as achievement and conquest, measured in worldly categories, or as the maximized fulfillment of ritual mitsvot. The 95 year-old woman who began her last day on earth by eating, and complimenting the breakfast her son had cooked for her, and regretting that her condition prevented him from delivering a scheduled lecture knew, without ever having opened a Musar *sefer*, R. Dessler’s division of humanity into two groups, those who give and those who take. She grasped thoroughly R. Dessler’s insight that the givers continue to give, even when they take, and that the takers take even when they appear to be giving. And so she gave her son the pleasure of enjoying the nourishment he gave her and gave him a last opportunity to acknowledge the honor and privilege that had been his in trying to see to her needs.

In only a few hours the call “Shulem, Shulem, Shulem” would irretrievably close the century long epic in which our entire family had taken part and in which I had played an increasingly crucial subordinate role. There would be many times ahead for our family and friends when my mother would be missed, happy events that would have been enhanced by her enjoyment, trivial news or significant occurrences where her comments or advice would have been sought and appreciated, visitors (some *talmidim* in particular) who would feel acutely the emptiness where once a human being had existed magnificently.

There are typical experiences we replay in recollection. Then there are encounters that cannot be anticipated, often with people who remain unknown. Ten years ago, in the rehab facility where my mother, following hip surgery in her late ‘80s, was making the fateful transition from being an elderly woman with some health problems to being a

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crippled old woman with the same problems, she was dedicated to her therapy and uninterested in the surroundings she strongly wanted to be temporary. A woman in the dining room hung her head to one side, and wept, and did not eat. I pretended not to notice and the next day steered my mother to a faraway table—she had her own troubles, which did not need to be reinforced by another's dejection. The third day my mother asked to be wheeled to that woman's table, and she, who rarely intruded or imposed herself on others, immediately laid down the law to the other. Did she not know that being on this floor meant that your doctors had determined that you could regain many of your skills and go home? Did she not appreciate the window of opportunity, measured in weeks, during which one could make progress? Did she not understand that this required a positive, forward-looking attitude?

And the anonymous woman listened and began to eat! Where is she now? Is she still alive? Was her benefit from my mother's sermon lasting? If this episode is vivid in my mind, because I was there, what of the innumerable human gestures that define each day in the company of strangers and friends and flesh and blood, and in the solitude we share only with God?

As Ramban taught, death is sad like parting. As he could have explained further, death is not like a single act of parting; it is more like innumerable partings, life withdrawing from every detail on every side.

Earlier I compared one strand in my experience of my mother's death to the final chord of a symphony. In retrospect it seems as if the whole long story, the life she made of her situation—from Polish childhood and escape from Europe, the murder of so many family members and the survival of others, through the decades of marriage and the longer period of widowhood, the many disappointments of life, the heroic years devoted to others, and the moments of achievement and satisfaction, her own and those of others, that sustained her pride and provided her pleasure—it is as if that epic history was meant to culminate in the weeks and months when, her soul composed for death, she lay in wait for its coming. It is as if, like the audience of a rare and astonishing musical masterpiece, one were to leap to one's feet, hoping for an encore, only to be brought roughly back to the hard realization that human life is a one-time affair. The protagonist has only one chance to get it right, and when the last chord resounds and a splendid success is assured, she has moved on swiftly without savoring her accomplishment, leaving the summing up to others.

Shalom Carmy

1912-2007. So soon. . . .

My mother, when the subject came up, claimed not to fear death, and her conduct did not betray her words. Neither did she care to dwell on the prospect of existence beyond the grave. If to Johnson, in his more doleful moods, death spells the threat of extinction and punishment, and if death, for Ramban, is a portal leading to eternal life, for my mother, death was one final task of giving to be endured and accomplished with dignity and gracefulness.

“May my death be the death of the righteous and my end like hers.”

Shalom Carmy