

Sister Theresa Aletheia Noble was a punk rock fan before she became a woman of the cloth. So it shouldn't be a shock that she strongly took to a practice developed by a priest from the 1880s that was marked by placing skulls around one's workplace. Memento Mori, the name of this practice, is a concept that involves intentionally thinking about your own death every day, as a means of appreciating the present and focusing on the future.

Her project has reached Catholics all over the country, via social media, a memento mori prayer journal — even merchandise emblazoned with a signature skull. Her followers have found unexpected comfort in grappling with death during the coronavirus pandemic. “Memento mori is: Where am I headed, where do I want to end up?” said Becky Clements, who coordinates religious education at her Catholic parish in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

I was struck by a quote she offered for why she finds this notion so meaningful for her: “Remembering death keeps us awake, focused, and ready for whatever might happen — both the excruciatingly difficult and the breathtakingly beautiful.” This whole project feels, all at once, very Jewish and not very Jewish at all.

Judaism has a bit of a different relationship with death. We certainly don’t shy away from it. We definitely have proper reverence for it, as anyone who has participated in a *chevra kadisha* or Jewish burial can attest. But we are not a religion that implores its devotees to confront death in the way the memento mori movement does. We’re often told “choose life.” The only time this seems to shift is Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for our deaths. We don't feed our bodies the normal physical nourishment they require. Many people wear white similar to the burial shrouds in which we'll one day be buried. We refrain from other creature comforts that signify life: bathing, intimacy, leather shoes, and oils and lotions. We read about the martyrs and the High Priest who confronted death each Yom Kippur in the holy of holies and the people would breathe a sigh of relief once they realized he hadn't died in confronting the Holy One.

Even in its macabre nature, it's actually quite powerful and meaningful. This liminal space is born into the world. Three hundred and sixty four days a year we live two dimensionally; alive or not alive. On Yom Kippur we take a twenty four hour detour into a third dimension.

We are neither fully alive nor fully dead. Today, we exist as our barebone self, stripped of all the externals which usually weigh us down.

So then how do we square this with the following teaching from Tractate Taanit in the Babylonian Talmud? *Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says, "There were never happier days for the Jews like the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur.* The 15th of Av is a lesser known holiday on the Jewish calendar which has become synonymous as a Jewish day of love, so that makes sense. Yom Kippur though?

The sages there in the Talmud connect it to the “joy” of atonement and forgiveness and wiping the slate clean. Either way though, it’s hard to pair that concept of joy with the notion of Yom Kippur as a dry run for our own deaths.

Maybe joy is the wrong word and impact, meaning, and fullness is a better way to describe this confrontation. What else could possibly explain the success of an app called WeCroak. Developed in 2018, this application was created with the sole purpose of reminding its users of their deaths. 5 messages arrive daily “at random times and at any moment just like death,” according to the app’s website, and are accompanied by a quote meant to encourage “contemplation, conscious breathing or meditation.

When Atlantic writer Biana Bosker took the app for a test run after its release, she imagined it to fall in a similar category of other meditation and mindfulness apps albeit with a more negative impact that would put her in a somber mood. Instead, she found the app powerful and much less of a time suck than these other apps.

Their daily usage ends up being many minutes long whereas the WeCroak app has their usage measured in seconds, which is the intent. We're not hardwired to dwell for long periods of time on our death; but for limited periods, there's immense benefit to that. As Bokser noted:

“By the fourth week, I begin to enjoy its company. Trembling with nerves before giving a talk to a group of strangers, I get a ping: “Don't forget, you're going to die.” What's a little public speaking next to the terrifying finality of my inevitable demise? Soon after, I'm at a friend's wedding, sulking about an impending deadline, when WeCroak again reminds me, “Don't forget, you're going to die.”

I loosen up, finish my champagne, and opt to enjoy myself.

With each day the app sounds less like a Hobbesian warning—“Life is short”—and more like an Oprah-esque affirmation: “Life’s too short!”

A bit irreverent to be sure but it seems there’s some connection here between the death confrontation of WeCroak with the death confrontation of Yom Kippur. In a long ranging discussion about the evil inclination and the good inclination that we’re all constantly battling, the Rabbis in the Talmud in Tractate Brachot offer up a blueprint as to how to overcome the evil inclination with the good inclination. If you can’t do it naturally, you should study Torah. If Torah doesn’t help you subdue the evil inclination, you should say the *Shema*.

Finally, if that doesn't work, the Talmud says **he should remind himself of the day of death**, whose silence is alluded to in the continuation of **the verse: "And be still, Selah."**

This is the final piece of the Talmud's solution. This meet up with one's death induces silence which allows one to reflect deeply on what's actually happening in their lives. Presumably, this is like all of us, struggling in the fight between our better angels and our worse angels. Once we've gotten to the point of envisioning our death, we enter into a conversation with ourselves in which we mirror back the important things in our life and find ways to shift.



This was seen as such an important idea that it was taken up by R Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro, the Esh Kodesh. The Piacezna Rebbe is known for many things but one of them was serving as the de facto Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto. It's hard to imagine a Rebbe living in the face of death more than the Piacezna Rebbe. But based on the teaching quoted above, the Esh Kodesh actually detailed a 10-step visualization process that a person should go through in envisioning their death, from illness to burial, in order to increase their fervor, *teshuva*, and soul-searching.

It's a bit intense and its specifics are not germane to this conversation but one of his responses to it is that he anticipates that people might hear of his idea and feel that it runs counter to many of the principles of the world of hassidut, which is built on joy and life. To that, he says the following:

“But know, Chassidic student, that our aim is not, Heaven  
forfend, to sadden you. We do not wish to sadden you, and you  
must guard yourself against becoming sad, for we have already  
mentioned above the teachings of the holy books as to how sadness  
is far removed – and removes man – from [God’s] service and from a  
pervading holiness. It is only with a view to subduing the evil  
inclination and arousing the positive inclination that the *gemara*  
says that one should keep in mind the day of death – not with a view  
to making him sad.”

Sadness actually prevents a person from being in relationship with God, so the intent of this practice is to arouse joy. That joy comes from taking stock of your life for the Divine Presence rests only on someone who is joyful over God's commandments.

This feels like an apt representation of what the Rabbis intended with Yom Kippur being a day of joy. Not just for the acts of teshuvah and atonement but for the realizations that we all go through in acting out this drama of quasi-death.

Then, we come to the day's final meeting point with death, yizkor. Yizkor allows us to part the curtain between life and death vividly. Yizkor, is, in and of itself, the opening up of the lines of communication. It's a method of preparation and confronting death so we are not totally caught off guard. And each Yizkor, respective to its holiday, offers I think a unique opportunity to do that.

If the whole day of Yom Kippur is this act of death and Yizkor is the moment in the day when we meet our relatives that have crossed over, there must be something special about this particular moment. This whole day is about our own individual relationship with our lives and mortality. When Yizkor comes we expand our perspective.

This is not just produced by our own hands but actually comes with the help of those we are remembering. Rabbi Chaim of Tchernovitz, known as the Be'er Mayim Chayim who lived in the 18th/19th centuries comments on that same Talmudic conversation about the battle between the good and evil inclinations.

Speaking to the last point about imagining the day of your death as the final piece, he believes that when we do that, a line of communication is opened up with those that we know and love that have passed before us.

Their souls are allowed entry into our world temporarily in order to be present with us. When that happens, he argues, it allows them to express to us their desires and mirror that back to us in our own lives. They see us for where we are and offer wisdom for where we ought to be. In other words, a clear portal between this world and the next happens on Yom Kippur during Yizkor. While we offer them the gift of asking for the Divine's help in remembering them, they return the favor in their sage advice back to us.

Some of us might have access to this year round. But on Yom Kippur, Rav Chaim argues that we all have the ability to tap into this. When we are in this play acting out the aspects of our own death, we are aided in this process by those no longer physically with us. Although, on this day and in this moment, we can feel their presence in an almost physical way.

These two opinions from the Esh Kodesh and the Be'er Mayim Chayim illustrate the deep power that exists on this special day, this access point to think about the end of our lives in order to make the rest of our lives more impactful. The unique aspect of it, while related to the Memento Mori that I started with, stands in stark contrast.

Memento Mori, the movement recently revitalized, is meant as a daily task. As the Esh Kodesh notes in his death visualization practice, it serves a very specific purpose for a very specific period of time. We don't ascribe to the idea that this should be done daily. It's too heavy and weakens the impact of what it's meant to do, allowing us to live our lives in fullness.

Memento Mori is after all the latin translation of the way that Yom Kippur is described in the Torah, a *Chok Olam*, a forever precept. We come back to that precept every year, not every day. Ours is a *memento mori* for 25 hours.

We engage with ourselves and those we are remembering and they do the same for us. The space of Yom Kippur and its unique and oldest version of Yizkor is a gift to which we should attune ourselves. The dead hear us and we can hear them too.

The curtain is parted today. Where death is normally a glimmer in the distance, today, we exist side by side. In that liminal space, there exists not just sadness but also joy and a gift. That transition is always ongoing.

So yes, Yom Kippur is one of the most joyous days of the year. We confront our mortality in as real a way as we can and we receive a gift in return. Not just the gift of appreciation for clarity on where we want to go but also the gift of conversation and time with those no longer with us.



All of us have the chance to encounter the fullness of Yom Kippur and its chok olam-ness. For this one day, we sit with the inevitable and eternal nature of our world, this memento mori, for in it and with the help of our loved ones, it reminds us how alive we really are.

May your memories today be full, clear, and inspire you to live the life you really want to be living.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah,

Rabbi Adir Yolcut