

FIVE MINUTES TO LIVE

Excerpts from Rabbi Kenneth Berger's

YOM KIPPUR DAY 1986 - 5747 SERMON

After Rabbi Berger first gave this sermon, numerous people requested copies. The sermon, excerpted here, is also providing solace for many because of the insights it gives into the Bergers' attitude toward life. (*Less than a month after the rabbi delivered this Yom Kippur sermon to his congregation Mishkan Torah in Greenbelt, Md., he and his wife Aviva were killed in a plane crash. He was 36 years old at the time of his death. The rabbi and his wife were survived by their three young children.*)

Dear Friends:

The scene still haunts me: It was perhaps the most awful moment of the past year. Against the pale blue sky on a crystal clear Florida day, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded before our very eyes. Seven brave astronauts, who just a few hours before were chatting with the press, schmoozing with proud relatives and friends, were suddenly gone.

I bring this to your attention because life and death is a major theme of Yom Kippur. We read in our Mahzor:

Who shall live, and who shall die?

Who shall attain the measure of man's days and who shall not?

On Rosh Hashanah, it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed.

This is, indeed, a time for "Heshbon Hanefesh", for self-introspection. The old adage "Here today – gone tomorrow" is indeed true. Just ask husbands, whose wives are suddenly taken: Wives, who suddenly find themselves alone, reaching over to find the other side of the bed cold and empty...

We know that death is a door through which every one of us must pass: There are no exceptions. Hopefully, when our last day comes, we might pass away with the grace and dignity of Yaakov Avinu, of our patriarch Jacob.

In our old age, lying in bed, with our family gathered around us, having told everyone we needed to tell, our words of love and concern, free of pain, free of guilt, at peace with God and with our fellow man. That's our dream.

But that's not the way it seems to happen in our time. Therefore, death frightens us, death is our greatest enemy. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his new work, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (required reading for all) that perhaps it is not really death that frightens us.

Listen to his words:

I believe that it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days, with the sense that we were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for.

...It is not how long we live: I suppose, for the most part, it is how we live each moment. Each hour. Each day.

For the seven astronauts on the space shuttle, their days were to be cut short. But like Moses, they had died climbing.

And yet, there is another part of the *Challenger* disaster which only came to light after several months of scientific investigations into the mishap.

I believe it is most relevant to the meaning of this holiest of days, a day on which we shall soon recite Yizkor. At first, it was thought that all seven astronauts had died immediately. At the moment of the explosion.

Now, it was discussed, that death had only come when the capsule hit the water. For perhaps as much as five minutes, the astronauts were alive and conscious and yet knew that death was certain.

The thought terrorizes me. Can you imagine knowing that in a few moments death was imminent? What would we think of, if God forbid, you and I were in such circumstances? What would go through our mind? What went through their minds, the seven astronauts?

Of course, no one will ever know for sure. But I believe in thinking about this that our Rabbis knew. And they injected three possibilities that a man on his death bed might think.

I know it's not pleasant, but I want you to consider on this Yom Kippur, what if? What if I had five minutes to live?

There are three possible responses, it seems to me and they all begin with the two words – if only!!!

First, if only I had known when I said goodbye to my loved ones – the very last goodbye! I want to read you an excerpt from a beautiful story of Holocaust literature entitled *The Kiss* by Yaffa Eliach. These are the Rebbe's own words.

I had a foreign passport from a South American country. It was a passport for myself, my Rebbetzin, of blessed memory, and for a young child. But when I received the passport, it was too late. There was no longer a Rebbetzin and my beloved grandson, as well as my daughter and son-in-law, were all gone too. Upon receiving the passport, I realized that I had the opportunity to save two Jewish souls, a middle-aged woman and a young child...

Two days later a father came with a small son, aged six. 'I am Perlberger,' he introduced himself. Then he went on: 'Rebbe, I am giving you my child. God should help you so that you should be able to save my son.' He bent down, kissed the child on his head and said, 'Shraga, from this moment on, this Jew standing here next to you is your father.

That kiss I can't forget. Wherever I go, that kiss follows me all my life. Before he shut the door behind him, the father took one more lingering look at his son. Then I heard the echo of his painful steps as he descended the stairs" ...

My friends. The father knew this was the last kiss. Can you imagine the love, the warmth, the tenderness that went into that last kiss? Maybe in a way he was lucky. He knew. The astronauts could not have known. If only, if only they knew.

In a very real sense, none of us know the time of our last kiss. My kids come in and kiss me before they leave for school. I kiss Aviva before I leave for the shul. Who knows what lies ahead, what tomorrow will bring? That one kiss, each kiss, must be with as much love and concern as possible.

... We are not in the ill-fated space shuttle: But we can learn and treat our loved ones as if we only had five minutes left.

What would be the second regret which might have gone through the minds of the astronauts?

If I only realized what I had when I had it.

This, I believe, would be our regret as well if death would come our way in five minutes.

One important part of our lives we so often neglect is appreciation of our spouses. Spouses often after years of marriage become such strangers to each other...

How many couples live together for years but stop sensing the other's joy, the other's frustrations: They no longer hear the cry of urgency, the pain – They just go through life day after day, month after month, year after year, strangers to each other.

Sometimes, their lives draw to old age and they are still strangers. How sad. They stopped communicating. They stopped appreciating what the other means.

The years they worked, while we went to school. The years life was simple, when a small apartment and a couple outfits would suffice. The flowers, the walks in the park, kissing in public. We didn't even care who was looking.

What happened to all of this? I believe, if we had five minutes, many of us would begin to see blessings that we may have taken for granted. We would yearn to say those words of appreciation, if we only had the opportunity.

And it is not only our spouses. ...What about our children? Do we appreciate them? Jonathan, my 5-year-old, takes a ring and drops it down the bathroom sink. Why? He wants to see what the pipe looks like if it is removed? I could have killed him – After I yell, he looks up to me and says, "Don't be so mad. You should be glad you have me." You know what? He was right, but I still punished him. You see, our kids are not nachas-providing machines to be only appreciated when they give us joy. I know. They drive us crazy. Little children, little problems; big children, big problems – and if we had five minutes, oh how we would yearn for more time with them. To love them. To appreciate them. To play with them. If only we could.

And what about life itself? Do we appreciate it?...

Do we appreciate the fact that we live in America, a bastion of freedom, the greatest country in the history of the world?

And, do we appreciate that we are in shul this Yom Kippur?

Some who were here last year are not here this year and never will be again.

You are here: I know for some it's aches and pains, physical and emotional. But you are here. Be grateful for that. I don't mean to be so blunt. But you are *not in a grave*. You are not in intensive care. You are not bed-ridden. You are in shul welcoming in another new year, and that sounds okay to me, and it should to you.

In short, say to yourself, boy, I am blessed, with being alive, with having family and friends, with the ability to be in shul welcoming a new year.

If only I appreciated what I had when I had it...Appreciate it now...my friends, when you have it.

Yes. If only I had known... If only I had realized and appreciated what I had: and as the shuttle falls through the sky, the third possibility: "if only I had another chance, I would do things differently."

I understand this "If Only" in the following way. Much has been discovered in the field of medicine. The technology of medicine over the last 10 years has actually been able to revive the dead.

Organ transplants, dialysis machines, and various drugs have not only prolonged life; but sometimes brings one back from the point of death.

In an interesting book, *Life After Life*, by Dr. Raymond Moody, he interviewed 150 patients who were at the point of death, and then miraculously were revived.

They all said similar things: They felt drawn to a bright light, which was beautiful and even exhilarating. They saw dead relatives, and a quick replay of their lives flashed before them. This, by the way, is what Kabalists told us happened hundreds of years ago.

Afterwards, none were afraid of death; and each said that as they reviewed their lives, there was one aspect they would do over – Now that they were given a chance to live again.

They would learn to love more intensely. *If only I could do it again, I would love* more intensely.

Let me focus on one troublesome phenomenon of our times. In a recent *Psychology Today* study, 50 percent of parents over age 65 surveyed felt unloved. The authors conclude that a growing problem in America has been neglect of aging parents.

That sounds like someone else's problem, not ours. Our tradition has always held a special place of status for our senior citizens, especially our own parents.

Of course, we love our parents, but let's be honest: at times, some of us resent them. Whatever we do is not enough. They are forever telling us how to spend our money, how to raise our kids... They think they are always right.

What is really going on? I believe all our parents are craving to remain the giant influences in our lives, to feel counted, to feel important. Sometimes they may become overburdening or irritating to us, but that's when they need our love even more intensely.

So let's give that love now to our parents so that we will never have to say:

"if only I could have another chance, I would have loved more intensely."

And what about our children. I see. Sometimes such communication barriers between children and parents.

"Where are you going? – Answer: "Out." What time will you be back?" – Answer: "Later."

Well, let me tell you, Kinderlach. If you or your parents had five minutes to live, I think you would have a lot more to say to your parents.

And let me tell you something else – Your parents are not going to be here forever – So what are you waiting for?

Now listen, I am not trying to lay a guilt trip on you, only to tell you the facts of life and ... death.

You have to be able to stand on your own two feet: But don't leave Mom and Dad behind. Share with them. Keep them informed. Let them be part of your life. For you never know when that five minutes might run out.

In short...Kids of all ages, husbands, wives, your parents, your spouses --- They need your affection. They need to be loved more intensely...

Soon it will be time for Yizkor and that scene still haunts me – the explosion and then five minutes. If only I. If only I...and then the capsule hits the water, it's all over. Then you realize it's all the same – five minutes, five days, 50 years. It's all the same for it is over before we realize.

Sunrise, sunset. My beautiful Aviva, 18 chai years together; my daughter, Avi, a Bat Mitzvah already, swiftly flow the years, and then it's over.

“If only I knew” – Yes, my friends. It may be the last time.

“If only I realize” – Yes, stop, appreciate the blessings you have.

“If only I could” – You still can – You've got today...**AMEN.**