



Choose Life: Holy Day Conversations IV

From the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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Conversation #1: Lessons One Generation Teaches Another

אבות פרק ד

אלישע בן אבויה אומר, הלומד ילד למה הוא דומה, לדיו כתובה על גיר חדש. והלומד זקן למה הוא דומה, לדיו כתובה על גיר מחוק. רבי יוסי בר יהודה איש כפר הבבלי אומר, הלומד מן הקטנים למה הוא דומה, לאוכל עגבים קהות ושותה יין מגתו. והלומד מן הזקנים למה הוא דומה, לאוכל עגבים בשולות ושותה יין ישן. רבי אומר, אל תסתכל בקנקו, אלא במה שיש בו. יש קנקו חדש מלא ישן, וישן שאפלו חדש אין בו:

M. Avot 4:20 (25-26)

Elisha ben Abuyah said: "Regarding the one who studies when young, to what can that person be compared? To ink written on new paper. Regarding the one who studies when old, to what can that person be compared? To ink written on paper that has been erased."

Rabbi Yose ben Yehuda of Kefar Ha-Bavli said, "Regarding the one who learns from the young, to what can this person be compared? To one eating unripe grapes and drinking wine from the winepress. Regarding the person who learns from the old, to what can this person be compared? To one eating ripe grapes and old wine."

Rabbi said, "Don't look at the wine flask, but rather at what is in it. For there are new wine flasks filled with old wine, and there are old wine flasks that don't even have new wine."

Rabbi David Wolpe: *Floating Takes Faith* - 64

How important are children to the religious life of adults? The maggid of Dubno answers that question with a parable:

Once a father traveled for miles with his son to reach a castle. Whenever they encountered a river or mountain, the father lifted his son on his shoulders and carried him. Finally they came to a castle, but its gate was shut, there were only narrow windows along the sides. The father said, "My son, up until now I have carried you. Now the only way we can reach our destination is if you will climb through the windows and open the gate for me from within.

So it is, said the maggid, with parents and children and God. Parents take care of their children, feed and clothe them, educate them, and see them through all manner of obstacles. Yet those same parents, who have so many strengths, often find the gate to God closed. But children have a spiritual magic. They can climb to places their parents cannot reach. They fling open the gates of heaven from within so that they and their parents can reach God together.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel - *Who Is Man?* - 98-99 - 1965

"A Person is responsible for what he is, not only for what he does. The primary problem is not how to endow particular deeds with meaning but rather how to live one's total being, how to shape one's total existence as a pattern of meaning. Is there a possibility of facing human existence as a whole from infancy to old age, or is man capable of living only in fractions, of going through the moments unrelated to one another...

Character education will remain ineffective if it is limited to the teaching of norms and principles. The concern must be not to instill timeless ideas, but to cultivate the concrete person. Life is clay, the character is form. How to lend shape, to bring order into the complexity of my inner and outer life? How to coordinate impulses, drives, and ambitions? How to simplify the self? The goal is to lend shape to existence, to endow all life with form.

Right living is like a work of art, the product of a vision and of wrestling with concrete situations.

We cannot, on the other hand, analyze man as being only here and now. Not only here, because his situation is intentional with the situation of other men scattered far and wide all over the world. Not only now, because his total existence is, in a sense, a summation of past generations, a distillation of experiences and thoughts of his ancestors. The authentic individual is neither an end nor a beginning, but a link between the ages, both memory and expectation....

Conversation #2: Life, Mortality and Eternity

שמות רבה פרשה מח:א

...יום מיתתו של אדם גדול מיום לידתו, למה? שביום שנולד בו אין אדם יודע מה מעשיו, אבל כשמת מודיע מעשיו...

אמר ר' לוי משל לשתי ספינות שהיו פורשות לים הגדול, אחת יוצאת מן הלמין ואחת נכנסת ללמין, זו שיוצאת היו הכל שמחין בה זו שנכנסת לא היו הכל שמחין בה, פקח אחד היה שם אמר חלופי הדברים אני רואה כאן זו שהיא יוצאת מן הלמין לא היו הכל צריכים לשמוח שאינן יודעין באיזה פרק היא עומדת ומה ימים מזדווגין לה ומה רוחות מזדווגות לה וזו שנכנסת ללמין היו הכל צריכין לשמוח לפי שהם יודעים שנכנסת בשלום ויצאה בשלום מן הים

כך אדם נולד מונין לו למיתה מת מונין לו לחיים...

Midrash Exodus Rabbah, 48:1

It is said in Ecclesiastes, 'The day of death is better than the day of birth' (VII, 1).

When a person is born, none know what her deeds will be; when she has died, people know them

R. Levi said: It is like two ships which sail upon the ocean. The one leaves the harbour, and the other returns to it. People rejoice over the first, and not over the second. But a clever man said: I take the contrary view. For the one which leaves the harbour we should not rejoice, for none know what seas and winds it will have to encounter; but for the ship which has returned to harbour, all should rejoice that it has come back in peace.

So with people. When she is born, they regard her as dead, when she is dead they regard her as living.

The Precious Present, Spencer Johnson, 36-52

The unhappy man was now tired of looking for the Precious Present. He had grown so tired of trying that he simply stopped trying. And then, it happened! He didn't know why it happened when it happened. It just.... Happened! He realized that the Precious Present was just that: THE PRESENT. Not the past; and not the future, but THE PRECIOUS PRESENT.

In an instant the man was happy. He realized that he was in the Precious Present. He raised both hands triumphantly into the cool, fresh air. He was joyous--for one moment. But then, just as quickly as he had discovered it, he let the joy of the present moment evaporate. He slowly lowered his hands, touched his forehead, and frowned. The man was unhappy--again.

"Why," he asked himself, "didn't I see the obvious long ago? Why have I missed so many precious moments?" "Why has it taken me so long to live in the present?" As the man remembered his fruitless travels around the world in his search for the Precious Present, he knew how much happiness he had lost.

He had not experienced what each special time and place had to offer. He had missed a great deal. And he felt sad. The man continued to berate himself. And then he saw what he was doing. He observed that he was trapped by his guilt about his past.

When he became aware of his unhappiness and of his being in the past, he returned to the present moment. And he was happy. But then the man began to worry about the future. "Will I," he asked, "be able to know the joy of living in the Precious Present tomorrow?" Then he saw he was living in the future and laughed--at himself.

He listened to what he now knew. And he heard the wisdom of his own voice. "It is wise for me to think about the past and to learn from it, but it is not wise for me to be in the past, for that is how I lose myself.

"It is also wise for me to think about the future, and to prepare for my future, but it is not wise for me to be in the future, for that, too, is how I lose myself. I lose what is precious to me."

It was so simple. And now he saw it. The present nourished him. But the man knew it was not going to be easy. Learning to be in the present was a process he was going to have to do over and over, again and again, until it became a part of him.

To Have Or To Be?, pp. 126-127
Dr. Erich Fromm (March 23, 1900 – March 18, 1980)

There is only one way -- taught by the Buddha, by Jesus, by the Stoics, by Master Eckhart - to truly overcome the fear of dying, and that way is by *not hanging on to life, not experiencing life as a possession*. The fear of dying is not truly what it seems to be: the fear of stopping living. Death does not concern us, Epicurus said, "since while we are, death is not yet here, but when death is here we are no more (Diogenes Laertius). To be sure, there can be fear of suffering and pain that may precede dying, but this fear is different from that of dying. While the fear of dying may thus seem irrational, this is not so if life is experienced as a possession. The fear, then, is not of dying, but of *losing what I have*: the fear of losing my body, my ego, my possessions, and my identity; the fear of facing the abyss of nonidentity, of "being lost."

To the extent that we live in the having mode, we must fear dying. No rational explanation will take away from this fear. But it may be diminished, even at the hour of death, by our reassertion of our bond to life, by a response to the love of others that may kindle our own love. Losing our fear of dying should not begin as a preparation for death, but as the continuous effort to *reduce the mode of having and to increase the mode of being*. As Spinoza says, the wise think about life, not about death.

The instruction on how to die is indeed the same as the instruction on how to live. The more we rid ourselves of the craving for possession in all its forms, particularly our egoboundness, the less strong is the fear of dying, since there is nothing to lose.