

## **“If Only” Reprise: Living Without Regrets**

### ***In Memory of Rabbi Kenneth Berger***

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A young rabbi stood on the *bimah* delivering his Yom Kippur sermon. He wanted to make a strong impression, so he banged on the lectern as he loudly delivered the first line: “Every member of this congregation someday will die!”

He paused and looked around. Everyone had a somber look on their face. Then he noticed that one man in the front row had responded differently from everyone else. This man was grinning at him! Certain the man in the front row had not heard him!

The rabbi again thundered, “I tell you that everyone in this congregation will one day die!” He looked down at the front row. He saw that the man was still smiling.

One last time the rabbi shouted, “True it is that eventually everyone in this congregation must die!”

To his consternation, he saw that the man’s grin had only grown larger. The rabbi paused and asked, “Excuse me sir, are you amused by that idea?”

“Oh no,” replied the man, “I’m not amused. I’m relieved.... You see, I’m not a member of this congregation!”

Okay... Maybe that’s not the best membership pitch! The truth is, we do know that all of us – members and non-members – will one day die. But we would rather not think about that reality. We tend to live our lives in a splendid state of denial of that simple fact. Then every so often events come along that force us to confront our own mortality.

One such event was the crash of the space shuttle Challenger 30 years ago. I was in Israel at the time and vividly remember the headlines: *Ason ba’Halal* – “Catastrophe in Space.”

Thirty years is a long time. You may wonder why I am speaking about Challenger today. I was reminded of that tragic day by a recent article in the New York Times. Perhaps some of you have read it. It was very touching.

It is the story of a colleague, Rabbi Kenneth Berger, whose Yom Kippur Yizkor sermon that year was about the Challenger. It seems that some time shortly before the holidays, it was revealed that biometric data showed the Challenger’s astronauts had remained alive and conscious for the 65,000 foot fall into the ocean.

Rabbi Berger called his sermon, “Five Minutes to Live.” In it, he compared the crew of the shuttle to Jews called upon during the High Holiday to engage in *heshbon hanefesh* – taking stock of our lives.

“Can you imagine knowing that in a few moments, death was imminent?” Rabbi Berger asked his Tampa congregation. “what would we think if, God forbid, you and I were in such circumstances? What would go through our mind?”

In an eerie twist of fate, Rabbi Berger and his wife perished in an airplane crash while returning with their family from vacation just three years later. They were in their 40s. In that crash, as in the case of the Challenger, passengers had time before impact and knew what was happening.

The New York Times article went on to describe how Rabbi Berger's Challenger Yizkor sermon had achieved a kind of immortality, living on as other rabbis through the years have delivered it or quoted from it. Its power stems from both its eloquence and its eerie sense of prophecy.

The story of Rabbi Berger's prescient words and their uncanny fulfillment in his own fate remind us, in the words which form the title of a well-known book about the High Holidays, "This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared."

I want to share Rabbi Berger's message with you today because it is so poignant. Rabbi Berger asked what went through the minds of the astronauts before their death? And we might ask what went through Rabbi Berger's mind before his death? What indeed would go through our minds if we knew we were about to die?

In his sermon Rabbi Berger suggests that there are three possibilities, and they all begin with the same two words: IF ONLY.

The first thought that crosses the mind of someone facing death is: IF ONLY I had known when I said goodbye to my loved ones that it was the very last goodbye.

He tells a very beautiful story from The Kiss by Yaffa Eliach. Eliach tells the story of a rebbe who was trying to escape from Nazi Europe and received South American passports for himself, his wife and child. But his family was already gone. He realized he could use the passports to save another woman and child.

He told the leaders of the community to bring him a child. Two days later six-year-old Shraga Perlberger and his father appeared at the Rebbe's door. The father said: "Rebbe, I am giving you my child. God should help you so that you should be able to save my son." He bent down and kissed the young boy on the head." "Shraga," he said, "from this moment on, this Jew standing here next to you is your father."

The rebbe and the boy both managed somehow to survive Bergen-Belson. But the Rebbe told Yaffa Eliach: "That kiss I cannot forget. Wherever I go, that kiss follows me all my life."

Can you imagine, asks Rabbi Berger, the love, warmth and tenderness of that last kiss? Maybe, suggests Rabbi Berger, in a way the father was lucky. He knew. The astronauts could not have known. If only, if only they knew.

Rabbi Berger goes on to say that none of us know the time of our last kiss. We never know what tomorrow will bring. So every single kiss should be with as much love and concern as possible. Every time we are with those we need to let them know what they mean to us. Never wait for tomorrow.

The second possible thought to cross a person's mind if they know they are facing death, according to Rabbi Berger, is: IF ONLY I had realized what I had when I had it.

So often we fail to stop and appreciate the gifts in our lives, and more important, the people who are gifts in our lives. Another story: Rabbi Berger describes a scene in the play, The Bald Soprano, about a man and a woman who meet on the train as apparent strangers.

In polite conversations, they discover they have an awful lot in common. They both live in the same town, the same building, the same apartment. They both have a daughter named Alice, seven years old. With one blue and one green eye. It is not long before they discover to their astonishment – and the astonishment of the audience – that they are husband and wife and have been married for some fifteen years.

Yes, Rabbi Berger says, there is exaggeration here, but also subtle truth. How many couples live together for years but stop sensing each other's joys and frustrations? How many couples stop listening to each other and no longer really know each other? As their lives draw to old age they become strangers, no longer able to appreciate each other.

And it's not just true of spouses. It's true of our children as well. Rabbi Berger tells the story of his 5-year-old son Jonathan dropping a ring down the bathroom sink. "I could have killed him," he said. But his son Jonathan said, "Don't be so mad, you should be glad you have me." Rabbi Berger goes on to say: "You see, our kids are not naches-producing machines, only to be appreciated when they give us joy.

I know they drive us crazy. Little children, little problems, big children, big problems. And if we had but 5 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."

In the same way, he asks, how much do we appreciate life itself? How much do we appreciate what it means to live in America, to be a part of this shul, to participate in this holy day?

"You are here," he says. "I know for some its 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 bedridden, you are in Shul welcoming a New Year. My friends, we must appreciate what we have when we have it."

Which brings us to the third possible thought when confronted by death: IF ONLY I had another chance, I would do things differently. And what would we do differently?

Rabbi Berger brings a study of 150 patients who all had near death experiences. They all were at the point of death and miraculously revived. Each one shared the same experience, one by the way that is described by Kabbalah: They felt drawn to a bright light. They saw their dead relatives. A quick replay of their lives flashed before them. And when they saw that life review, they all said there was one thing they would do over differently now that they were given life again. They would love more intensely.

He quotes another study, in Psychology Today that had shown that 59% of parents over age 65 felt unloved. The authors concluded that neglect of parents was a growing problem in America. I wager that has not changed.

Of course, says Rabbi Berger, we love our parents. But let's be honest, at times we 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's going on? And Rabbi Berger answers his own question: They cannot do all that they used to. It must be so frustrating for them. They are still trying to hang on, to remain a major influence in our lives, to feel counted, important. Sometimes they may become overburdening or irritating to us. But that's when they need our love even more intensely.

The same is true for our children and our spouses. Rabbi Berger adds: "Let's give them that love now so that we will never have to say: If only I had another chance, I would have loved more intensely."

Rabbi Berger concludes: "The scene still haunts me. The explosion, then only five minutes. If only, I... If only, I... and ten the capsule hits the water, it's all over. Then you realize it's all the same: 5 minutes, 5 days, 5 years, 50 years. It's all the same, for it is over before we realize.

And I am haunted in the same way by Rabbi Berger's death. I can't help but wonder... were these his thoughts in his final moments? I think not. Rabbi Berger was blessed to see these truths, and no doubt lived his life by them. He was blessed to live a life with no regrets.

Our sages taught that the righteous need no monument. Their words and deeds are their memorial. Rabbi Berger's words continue to live on after him each time they are taught, and I am honored to now be able to be a part of that chain of memory.

His challenge to us is for us to live by them as well. As we recite this Yizkor, may we resolve in our heart to live our lives in such a way that we will never have to say "If only, I..."

If only, I knew that would be the last kiss  
If only, I realized what I had when I had it  
If only, I had loved more intensely.

May we learn from his example to show love and appreciation every day, to make the most of God's gifts, and to love intensely every moment.