

## Interfaith Prayer from Chautauqua • No. 5

# When Death Knocks: A Prayer

Nothing is so precious as life.

In Judaism, even the Sabbath laws can be broken to fulfill the commandment of *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a life. When a person dies, the prescribed prayer, the mourner's *kaddish*, proclaims that God's name needs to be "magnified and sanctified," precisely because the loss of a life diminishes — by one soul — the presence of God in the world. Each of us possesses a spark of Godliness.

Yet, in the ecology of human existence, death has a way of making us "number our days," making every moment count. When death knocks, we gain new perspective on what in our life is truly precious, and what is not. On Judaism's holiest day, Yom Kippur, we wear white and abstain from food and drink to simulate near-death. It is not to scare us, but to wake us up to take stock of whether we are living our lives in accordance to the highest possible ethical and moral standards. When we fall short, when we hurt another person, we are called to make amends, ask forgiveness of the person we have wronged and commit to a more righteous path.

The global Coronavirus pandemic drives home an essential religious truth. We are all One. We are all part of the human community. We are all at risk. Death may be knocking at our door.

May we, in the days, weeks and months ahead, find the strength to manifest the better angels of our nature and not succumb to the selfishness and greed that sometimes overtakes us in times of fear. May we reach out to those we love with words of tenderness and compassion. May we take the time to expand our universe of concern to friends, acquaintances and colleagues with a simple phone call.

May we give thanks and be grateful if we are fortunate enough to have a comfortable home as we "shelter in place." At the same time, let us be aware of how many who have less. There are thousands who have no shelter of their own at all (e.g. immigrants, the homeless). Many, many more have shelter but are food insecure; might have illnesses or disabilities that make it hard to venture out and get food or medicine; do not have computers or internet to stay connected with the wider world; or live with abusive partners, meaning even "shelter" can be a living hell. If we are in a position to help those, most vulnerable among us, let do our part. Let us be inspired by the self-sacrifice of thousands of health care professionals and first-responders whose courage in the face of danger is nothing short of heroic.

And when this trial passes, as it surely will, let us re-enter the human community with a newfound appreciation for our interdependence, our need to narrow the gap between the haves and the have-nots and our responsibility to be better stewards of our all too fragile planet.

—**Rabbi Sid Schwarz**

Interfaith Friday, Week Eight (Aug. 21, 2020)

Senior fellow, Hazon

April 8, 2020