



THE BLOG 10/05/2016 10:02 pm ET

Who By Strangling And Who By Starbucks: The Fate Of Yom Kippur



By Marty Kaplan



MONZINO VIA GETTY IMAGES

What would you give to know who'll win the election? A lot, I bet — not because you'll know whether to get out of the stock market, but because the anxiety is killing you.

What if someone could tell you whether that sweetie you're flirting with is truly your bashert, your intended, or whether Alzheimer's is in your future, or even how *Game of Thrones* will end?

The promise of clairvoyance keeps psychics and pundits in business. Knowing the ending is the storyteller's superpower. Omniscience is God's ace in the hole. If we knew what God knows about us, if we foresaw our fate, maybe we'd choose to live like angels. But if fate is a crock, then Einstein is playing dice with the universe, and Judgment Day is just magic thinking.

Not long ago I read in my alumni magazine that a guy I knew when I lived in Washington, D.C., who later became a judge in Los Angeles, had been killed by a car as he was crossing the street near his home in Pico-Robertson. When I first met him, he was a lawyer at a federal agency who moonlighted as a standup comic. I saw his act once, at a comedy club on Connecticut Avenue; he was actually pretty good.

His passing brought to mind another man's obit, also in my alumni magazine. I didn't know him, but I've never forgotten it. A 40-year-old astrophysicist, a Stanford professor, was visiting his father in New Jersey for Father's Day. He was sitting alone in a Starbucks, catching up on work on his laptop and sipping coffee, when out of nowhere a red Mustang GT crashed through the Starbucks window and killed him. The professor had taught a popular undergraduate class called "The Nature of the Universe"; his research interests included cosmology and dark matter. The driver was unharmed.

What is the nature of a universe that can contain such darkness? The mind struggles to make sense where there is no sense; the soul weeps. Man plans; God does standup.

On the Day of Atonement a few days from now, in unison with my fellow congregants at Temple Israel of Hollywood, I will recite the *U'Netaneh Tokef* prayer. On that day, we will say, our fate is sealed:

*Who shall live and who shall die
Who at the measure of days and who before
Who shall perish by water and who by fire
Who by the sword and who by wild beasts
Who by famine and who by thirst
Who by earthquake and who by plague
Who by strangling and who by stoning...
But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree.*

Do you believe in fate? Or is fate a name for our vain effort to impose necessity on chance? Can repentance avert fatality, or will it be our bad luck, not our bad behavior — a chaotic cosmos, not a sinful soul — that will pin us against the Mustang's grill?

Leave it to Jews, 10 days after the festive celebration of Rosh Hashanah, to devote 25 hours to simulating our own deaths. I wish you everything good, darling, a healthy and sweet New Year — Hey! Not so fast, kiddo, suck on this: You're gonna die.

Yom Kippur is when devout Jews, twice-a-year Jews and everyone in between heads to shul to rehearse our own deaths. From sundown to sundown, we fast; corpses don't eat or drink, nor do we. We wear white, the color of the kittel, the traditional burial shroud. No showering, no shaving, no brushing your teeth, no makeup, no sex — just like in the cemetery. We say the *Vidui*, the deathbed prayer. We confess our sins and forgive those we've sinned against. Full of dread, we inventory the ways we may die. We repent, and we pray to avert our fate. If we wrestle with the taboo truth that bad things do happen to pious people, we keep it to ourselves.

And then, when three stars can be seen in the sky, the shofar blows, we kiss our families and friends, we break our fasts with bagels and lox and we return to our regular lives, imbued — for a while, anyway — with renewed awe at our existence and gratitude for our endurance.

This descent and return from death is not just a Jewish journey, and not just the path of the believer. Anyone, religious or secular, who has survived a terrible illness or accident; who has lost or nearly lost a loved one; who has experienced the arbitrary, minuscule gap between their lot and the tragedies of others — all lifetime long, we are all summoned to private Yom Kippurs, to revelations of the good luck of being and the bad joke of nothingness.

These awakenings are not the exclusive province of misfortune. Art, music, literature, nature, love: these, too, can loft us to a sublime whose transcendence inevitably entails mortality. "Death," Wallace Stevens wrote in "Sunday Morning," "is the mother of beauty." If there were no endings, there could be no stories. But here's the rub: Artistic genius may take us out of time, but immortality belongs to the artwork, not to us.

I believe in the story of a God who writes and seals my fate in a Book of Life each year, but I don't believe in such a God, and I can't accept that concept of fate. Here's what I do accept, because I have to: Fatality, which fate inheres in, doesn't depend on my believing in it or not.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director