

## Meaningful Yesterdays, Important Tomorrows

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In Rachel Kadish's novel, *From a Sealed Room*, we meet Maya, a young woman from New York, spending the year in Israel, living out her mother's dream. Decades earlier, her mother had visited cousins in Israel, always intending to return. Now, though, Maya's mother is ill. Having floundered in college, Maya tentatively seeks to repair her fraught relationship with her mother. A year in Israel feels right, getting to know those relatives her mom always told her about.

Maya, though, delays contacting the cousins. Instead, she falls in love with an abusive man. Maya writes to her mother regularly, falsely cataloging the year in Israel her mother had hoped for her, pretending to be exploring the length and breadth of Israel, when in reality she has become a prisoner in her apartment.

At long last, Maya comes to know her Jerusalem relatives, including Shmuel, boyfriend of the family's grandmother, Fanya. Now, though, Maya needs to return to New York quickly. She has received a call; her mother is dying. Maya frets about the reunion, exclaiming, "She'll be so disgusted with me she won't want anything to do with me. I've told her lies; I've been terrible." Shmuel disagrees: "Whatever happened yesterday, however bad it was, isn't as important as what can still happen. The most important yesterday isn't as important as tomorrow."<sup>i</sup>

The conversation does not take place on Yom Kippur, but Shmuel's message would be appropriate for the day. Writing about the High Holy Days, Maimonides taught: "Throughout the year, a person should always see themselves as equally balanced between good and evil...If they commit one sin, they tip their balance ... to the side of guilt and bring destruction upon themselves. On the other hand, if they perform one *mitzvah*, they tip their balance...to the side of merit and bring deliverance and salvation to themselves and others."<sup>ii</sup>

For Maya, that may mean rushing home to be at her mother's side, doing what she can to repair the relationship before it's too late. She may even find her dying mother striving to do the same.

At a deeper level, though, Shmuel is right to say that no yesterday is as important as tomorrow. His and Maimonides' message is important: We cannot undo our actions of the past. Focusing on the rearview mirror is important as we seek to apologize to those we have harmed and to change our ways. However, we will only know our repentance was successful by examining our behavior going forward. In the future. Tomorrow.

Our beloved dead, whom we mourn today, do not have tomorrows, days on which they can change their ways, living their תשובה, their repentance. And we do not have tomorrows with them.

It might be more than we can bear, were we not also blessed with Jewish teaching about the ways that our loved ones **do** have tomorrows, and about how **we** can bestow meaningful futures upon them. Some of us may even find ways today to forgive people who have died.

Poet Laura Gilpin wrote:

These things I know:

how the living go on living  
and how the dead go on living with them.<sup>iii</sup>

Our loved ones' "yesterdays" are important parts of our lives—mostly for good, hopefully, but all relationships are complicated, even after a person who was an important part of our lives has been gone many years, even decades. Our memories are many and varied, but all are meaningful. They shape our lives.

With fond, even inspiring remembrances, we can transform meaningful yesterdays into important tomorrows. When we live our loved ones' values in our own lives, we provide a future to our beloved dead. Some remember a grandparent for whom maintaining a strong Jewish community was a priority. When we practice Judaism actively, we are their tomorrow. Some recall a parent whose unconditional love empowered their children to grow into happy, successful adults. When we offer that unconditional love to the next generation, our own children or others, our beloved dead live through us. Others recall a spouse, a sibling, or a friend from whom we learned valuable lessons about ourselves, making us the people we are today. Each of our tomorrow is also theirs.

At the same time, we acknowledge that some people who were once in our lives, now deceased, brought us pain. Some were abusive. But even memories of cruelty, neglect, and abuse can be meaningful, transformed into better tomorrows, albeit by finding ways to live **unlike** those who harmed us. Forgiveness in these cases may best come by thanking them for showing us how **not** to behave.

Shmuel may be right when he says that no yesterday can be as important as any tomorrow, but he's missing something critical: Every yesterday shapes each of our tomorrows.

People we remember today **do** have tomorrows, here with us, for good and even for ill, because of the ways their yesterdays still impact our lives. That's an important Yom Kippur reminder for us, relevant on this day when we know that we

teeter on the edge between good and evil, that what we do next matters most because it will tip the balance. At Yizkor, too, we cannot deny: One day, our yesterdays will shape the tomorrows of those who live after we have died.

All that is true, even if those who have died don't enjoy immortality of their own souls, but who can deny the **possibility** of life after death? We pray that, in God's embrace, our loved ones enjoy tomorrows that the human mind can neither comprehend nor describe, their souls bound up with the souls of all who went before them. One day, God willing, after living productively to one hundred twenty, our souls, too, will be united with theirs, for the blissful blessing of infinite heavenly tomorrows.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rachel Kadish, *From a Sealed Room*, Houghton Mifflin, 1988, chapter 16.

<sup>ii</sup> Mishneh Torah, *Hilchot T'shuvah*, 3:4.

<sup>iii</sup> Laura Gilpin, "Life after Death," in *Mishkan HaLev*, Rosh Hashanah, p. 87.