

FIVE MINUTES TO LIVE

Excerpts from Rabbi Kenneth Berger's

YOM KIPPUR DAY 1986 - 5747 SERMON

After Rabbi Berger first gave this sermon, numerous people requested copies. The sermon, excerpted here, is also providing solace for many because of the insights it gives into the Bergers' attitude toward life. (*Less than a month after the rabbi delivered this Yom Kippur sermon to his congregation Mishkan Torah in Greenbelt, Md., he and his wife Aviva were killed in a plane crash. He was 36 years old at the time of his death. The rabbi and his wife were survived by their three young children.*)

Dear Friends:

The scene still haunts me: It was perhaps the most awful moment of the past year. Against the pale blue sky on a crystal clear Florida day, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded before our very eyes. Seven brave astronauts, who just a few hours before were chatting with the press, schmoozing with proud relatives and friends, were suddenly gone.

I bring this to your attention because life and death is a major theme of Yom Kippur. We read in our Mahzor:

Who shall live, and who shall die?

Who shall attain the measure of man's days and who shall not?

On Rosh Hashanah, it is inscribed and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed.

This is, indeed, a time for "Heshbon Hanefesh", for self-introspection. The old adage "Here today - gone tomorrow" is indeed true. Just ask husbands, whose wives are suddenly taken: Wives, who suddenly find themselves alone, reaching over to find the other side of the bed cold and empty...

We know that death is a door through which every one of us must pass: There are no exceptions. Hopefully, when our last day comes, we might pass away with the grace and dignity of Yaakov Avinu, of our patriarch Jacob.

In our old age, lying in bed, with our family gathered around us, having told everyone we needed to tell, our words of love and concern, free of pain, free of guilt, at peace with God and with our fellow man. That's our dream.

But that's not the way it seems to happen in our time. Therefore, death frightens us, death is our greatest enemy. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote in his new work, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (required reading for all) that perhaps it is not really death that frightens us.

Listen to his words:

I believe that it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days, with the sense that we were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for.

...It is not how long we live: I suppose, for the most part, it is how we live each moment. Each hour. Each day.

