

Intimations of Mortality

Thought for the Day

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I'm told there are people who plan their time efficiently, arrive early for all their appointments, meet all their deadlines - but I have to rely on second-hand information for this! I'm one of those who never had time for time-management, for whom a deadline isn't quite real until it's all but dead, and for whom management is always crisis management. But still I just about cope – until, that is, even the crises have a crisis!

It's been that kind of week: no-one plans to write off their car, and of course the knock-on effect is enormous as we have to deal with the mound of unplanned and unwelcome paperwork. It as if time itself had suddenly shrunk!

But those are trivial consequences – thank Gd only the cars were damaged and no-one was seriously hurt – but I cannot help being conscious that a fraction of a second here or there and I would not be around to tell this tale.

So suddenly one becomes all the more aware of the other unforeseen pitfalls in the way of our daily routine: the 5 am phone-call about the death of a friend, the reports of storms and plane crashes – all intimations of what might have been. It is not for nothing that the rabbis taught that we should live our lives as if every moment was our last.

For Jewish people throughout the world this is a time of collective soul-searching, as we approach our new year. This is marked not by office parties and plum pudding, but by penitence and prayer, and indeed even the Hebrew word for prayer means "self-examination". It is a time when we focus on our own mortality, recognising, in the words of one prayer, that life is like "withering grass, a fading flower, a passing cloud, flying dust, and a fleeting dream."

We can make so much of life – but we can so easily lose it, whether through our own carelessness or through forces of disease or nature which are beyond our control. Having the humility to recognise our mortality is part of coming to terms with our powerlessness in the face of something far greater than ourselves.