When I was growing up in Flint, MI, in the 1970s, I had a friend who lived around the block from us who came from an Evangelical Christian family. One of the things that I really appreciated about my friend Bobbie was that he was interested in talking about subjects that most other kids our age weren't. He was into things like morality and truth that even many of the adults I knew did not spend so much time discussing.

He liked to ask me about Jewish ideas and practices and then compare these to his understanding of the Baptist tradition that he came from. Sometimes we discovered a fair amount of overlap between our respective religions while at other times, they were clearly coming from very different places.

One of the conversations that seemed to come up on a fairly regular basis had to do with comparing our two traditions' beliefs about life after death. Part of why Bobbie continued to raise this question was that he was very clear about how and why the transition from this world to the next takes place and this clarity gave him cause for concern about my prospects, as a Jew, for doing so successfully. I would typically respond that I was not all that worried, in part because I didn't really think that Judaism really had much a concept of an afterlife.

In the very limited teaching I had been exposed to in religious school, I had heard at most, references to a vague notion of the soul returning to God, and some of my teachers even seemed to imply that as Jews, we were really only supposed to focus on living a righteous life in this world, and that it wasn't really a good use of our time to think too much one way or the other about what might come later.

It was not until I pursued traditional Jewish study at a yeshiva after finishing college, and even more so as I went through rabbinical school, that I came to understand how partial and distorted the perspective I had been exposed to in my religious school days was.

It was fairly shocking to me to discover how much our tradition takes for granted the notion of an afterlife, and I became intrigued with trying to figure out how it came to be that such a deeply held conviction was transformed into the nebulous and relatively inconsequential notion that was transmitted to me as a child.

The short answer to that question, as I learned through my studies at rabbinical school, has to do with the Jewish community being fully welcomed to participate in western society over the past couple of hundred years. This process in turn caused many Jewish individuals and institutions to represent Jewish tradition in the most modern and rational light possible, a dynamic that was especially strong in the United States. Not surprisingly, the belief in an afterlife did not fit easily into that framework, and so, over the course of several generations in which this concept was downplayed, we arrived at a moment by the middle of 20th century, in which a significant percentage of the American Jewish community had literally forgotten that there was any attention ever paid to this idea in Jewish thought.

For us as a Reconstructionist Jewish community, I think this is an especially complicated issue to discuss. Within the context of an American Jewish public that has been largely oriented to rationality and intellectual sophistication, our denomination has seen itself as being at the very forefront of cultivating that perspective.

Mordecai Kaplan, as the intellectual and spiritual founder of our movement, cared more than anything about synagogues being places that welcomed and appreciated the most modern thinking about life and religion. And, certainly in his day, and within his philosophically oriented circle, the notion that one could imagine the existence of human consciousness in the absence of a body to house it would not have even come close to meeting the test of modern reasonability. So, given all of this, you might be wondering why would I choose to make this topic the focus of a sermon on Yom Kippur?

Fortunately, I have a three part answer to that question that I'd like to share with you. The first part has to with the symbolism embedded within Yom Kippur itself, and the recognition that one of the deeper ways of understanding its meaning, is to see it as an all-encompassing encounter with our own mortality.

The elements of the holiday that support this encounter include the prominence of the Book of life in our prayer texts, which implies a corresponding book of death that we don't tend to discuss very much. It also includes the withdrawal from our most basic life-affirming activities, such as eating, drinking, bathing and sexual relations, and the wearing of the traditional ritual gown called a kittel, the article of clothing worn at important spiritual moments such as the high holy days and at the Passover seder, and when one's body being prepared for burial.

All of this in no way detracts from the more common meaning of the holiday, focused on assessing our strengths and our challenges, and re-committing ourselves to living lives of goodness and authenticity. On the contrary, consciously grappling with the reality of our own limited time on earth may be the most powerful kind of inspiration for doing the moral and spiritual accounting that the tradition expects from us at this time of year.
I do recognize that this particular angle on the question of mortality is different from the one we would typically anticipate hearing. Yet, I think we, in the Jewish community, have done ourselves a disservice in our tacit, multi-generational agreement to exclude any engagement with the mystery of what might or might not await us on the other side of this life, as we wrestle with the implications of our own finitude.

This assertion is supported by part two of my answer, which consists of the observation that for many members of the liberal Jewish world, there has been a significant upsurge in interest in this afterlife question over the past 20 years or so. I can't count the number of times that I have been approached by Jewish individuals who are trying to sort out where our tradition stands on this question, but who are hamstrung by the same lack of clarity that I encountered in my own Jewish education process.

And I always recognize, and identify with, the look of astonishment that I see in their eyes when I share with them that Judaism has been fairly unequivocal, at least for the past two millennia, about the actuality of some kind of conscious existence that extends beyond the cessation of the body.

A related signal of the recent re-emergence of this question within the liberal Jewish world is the relatively large number of books that have been published, dealing in one way or another with this question. There are well over a dozen within the last two decades with titles like, "Jewish views of the afterlife," "What happens after I die" and, "does the soul survive?"

Some might critique this trend as an example of regression to a kind of pre-modern fantasy in the face of an overly complicated and frightening modern world, but I actually see it from the opposite perspective. And this brings me to part three of my answer.
I think this renewed interest in life after death stems, in part, from the growing recognition of the limits to what an exclusively scientific and rational stance towards life can and cannot provide in the way of answers to the ultimate questions of our existence.

Liberal Judaism in America really came of age at a moment in history when there was unbridled optimism about and confidence in the explanatory and problem solving capacity of scientific investigation, and we completely identified ourselves with this perspective.

Today though things are a little different. Even as scientific understanding and its technical applications have expanded beyond the wildest dreams of those who lived even in the recent past, there has been a parallel expansion in our awareness of how much is still not understood about the workings of our world.

One relevant and powerful example from this category is the debate that continues to swirl around the nature of our very own human consciousness. While it is a widely assumed by many in western culture that our consciousness is ultimately nothing more than a by-product of the physical and chemical properties of our brain, , there are many other voices in the scientific community that view this assumption as being grounded more in the ideology of materialism than in true scientific inquiry.

This example is of course more than a general comment on the current status of the scientific enterprise, in that it bears directly on our discussion this morning. If it were ever to be conclusively proven that the brain is the sole source of our conscious experience, then the entire question of life after death would be resolved with a resounding No.

However, the small amount of anecdotal evidence that does bare on this question, actually seems to point in the opposite direction.
This body of evidence comes from research into an obscure and little understood corner of human life that has become known in recent years as the near death experience or NDE for short.

These experiences are defined by a person coming close to dying, or in some cases even being declared clinically dead, and while in that state, experiencing some or all of a group of perceptions that would strike most modern minded people as quite unusual to say the least:

Those who have been through an NDE sometimes report a sense of rising towards the ceiling of the hospital room such that they are able to view the medical staff working on their body below. Many report a sense of movement through darkness or a tunnel that leads toward a great light at the other end. Some describe perceiving a non-physical realm of existence, which may include vividly memorable landscapes; encounters with deceased loved ones, spiritual beings and/or religious figures.

Yet another another common element involves feeling imbued with an intuitive understanding of the nature of the universe and the purpose of life. Now, the fact that much of the content of these reports goes way beyond the bounds of reality, as we normally understand and experience it, is one thing. But there is a much bigger issue, from a western scientific point of view, embedded within these narratives. It is, that all of these Near Death Experience perceptions seem to have taken place precisely when these individuals, according to the instruments they were hooked up to, were not producing any brain activity; a situation which at face value directly challenges the prevailing assumptions about the dependency of consciousness on the brain.

Not surprisingly, such accounts have generated an enormous amount of controversy, especially in the scientific community, and there are a number of theories that have attempted to explain these phenomena from within the current understandings of western science and medicine. In one way or another, they all argue that these experiences are generated by a brain in distress and in the process of shutting down. But as one NDE researcher put it, "*No single physiological or psychological model by itself explains all the common features of the near death experience, and complex perceptual processes during a period of apparent clinical death challenge the concept that consciousness is localized exclusively in the brain.*"

The other compelling aspect of the near death phenomenon involves the profound and long term impact on the lives of those who undergo these experiences. Some examples of this impact include: a strong decrease or complete loss of the fear of death, a marked increase in concern for the welfare of others, a sense of intrinsic purpose or meaning in life, increased curiosity, and an increased capacity to respond skillfully to stressful situations. While not universally attested to, the vast majority of people who have been interviewed about their NDE report a palpable increase in their appreciation of their lives, along with the reduction of their fear regarding what comes next.

For me, what this research on near death experience points towards is the legitimacy, and even the necessity, of our Jewish communal re-engagement with these questions around post-mortem continuity after our two century hiatus from acknowledging their existence. This is not about convincing anyone to believe one thing or another.

It's about recognizing that we, as human beings, have a profound mystery at the center of our lives, and about not pretending that its presence is irrelevant. Whether we lean towards a position of skepticism, or openness, or somewhere in between, I think it's important the we acknowledge that there is a significant faith component involved regardless of the stance we take.

Personally, I would identify myself as an open agnostic when it comes to thinking about this issue, but one thing I am not agnostic about is the added depth and richness of our lives when we have it on our radar screen. As the holiday of Yom Kippur teaches us, our willingness to wrestle with deep questions can generate significant leverage for change and insight. May we be wise enough not to exclude from consideration one of the deepest questions of all.
Good Yuntif, Shabbat Shalom, Gmar Hatimah tovah.