



LIFE ETERNAL: SAY MY NAME

*Lifting up the teachings and actions of our loved ones who have died
may be the blessing, even when the dawn has yet to come.*

Kol Nidre 5780

This sermon is a love letter to Gail and Colin, whose beautiful children, Ruby and Hart, were tragically killed when hit by a drunk driver early this summer.

Every year as we enter Yom Kippur, we take a step out of our death-denying culture and peer, for one day, into the deep. Every year we talk about how the rituals and liturgy of this day create for us a deathscape: we fast, we wear white, we say Yizkor, immersing in the memories of loved ones who have died. We sit with the terrible realization that we are—all of us—standing at the edge of the abyss. That some of us will be here next year and some will not.

We do this not to punish ourselves, but because we have more clarity around what matters most when we stand at the edge of life.

This year, maybe we don't need Yom Kippur to remind us.

There's a way in which profound, catastrophic loss reverberates, shaking everyone to the core.

Ruby and Hart's deaths have sent tremors through our community. A week after the funeral, I was sitting in my dentist's chair and—I couldn't help it—I burst into tears. The dentist (thankfully) pulled her hands out of my mouth and said, "What, is this about Ruby and Hart?" She didn't know they were IKAR people, she didn't even know that I knew them. But she, it turned out, was their dentist too, and was equally devastated. The pain waves tore through our city and far beyond.

So tonight, maybe we don't need the reminder of how very fragile life is. Maybe instead, tonight we need to figure out how to hold grief and love in light of the ever-present reality of loss.

So I dedicate this sermon, with love, to Gail and Colin.

And to everyone else in this room for whom grief is real and lives at the surface, whether the loss is fresh—like it is for R' Dvora and Sara & David, for Laurie, Gerald, Marlene, Caroline and others—or happened years ago. This sermon is dedicated to everyone who has walked through the valley of the shadow of death, who has struggled with waves of grief and wrestled with survivors' guilt, who has wondered if you can go on with your loved one gone.

And to all of you, our beautiful community. Maybe loss hasn't touched you directly yet, but you have shown up with love when you could have run away, and that means everything. This is a love letter to all of you.

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There are a few lessons that you learn, in the course of time, that live within you forever.

My friend Mindy lost two siblings in two different tragic car accidents. She knows something about loss. I called her three years ago after Gidi—a beloved child in our community—died, just a few days before his 5th birthday.

“Gidi’s family is coming to shul again this Shabbat,” I said. “Should I say his name again?”

“Why would you not?”

“I don’t know. What if they’re finally breathing and I bring them back into the grief?”

“Let me tell you something, Sharon,” she said. “You say his name. This time, and every time you see them. They’re never not thinking about him. By not saying his name, you’re not protecting them, you’re only making them feel like they’re holding their grief alone.”

A couple of weeks ago, Gidi’s older brother, Zeve, reinforced this idea at his bar mitzvah: “[The] darkness in our lives is real,” he said, “and honoring the pain is how we help ourselves and others. My family retells Gidi’s story to remember him. We know that it can be hard to listen to the tragedy and curse that has befallen our family. But the fact that our community has been willing to listen has been so important for our hearts.”

I said Gidi’s name that Shabbat, and every time I’ve seen the family since.

I want to speak tonight about the power of saying a name.

There’s a very old, very beautiful Jewish idea that when you teach, you should always speak *b’shem omro*, in the name of the person you learned an idea from.

That’s why you’ll see throughout Rabbinic literature the meticulous, even onerous listing of attributions. Who brought that powerful teaching in Masekhet Shabbat (54b) about the obligation to protest transgressions committed in our home, our city, our country and the world? That’s Rav and R’ Hanina, R’ Yohanan and R’ Haviva, though some say it was R’ Yonatan not R’ Yohanan. No editor today would tolerate that—a two, three, or four generation recitation of those who inspired every teaching you now cite.

The notion of speaking *b’shem omro* is so central, so essential, that in Pirkei Avot (6:6) the Rabbis say: כָּל הָאוֹמֵר דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ מְבִיא גְּאֻלָּה לְעוֹלָם – *One who speaks in the name of the person who originally taught it brings redemption to the world.*

Redemption to the world? I understand why it’s important to give credit when you share other people’s ideas. Years ago, after a friend attempted to publish my Master’s Thesis in her own name, my rabbi, Marcelo, said to me: If you’re a person in the world with something to share, you have two choices. Either you give it to the world, and others will claim it as their own, or you lock it up inside and it will remain forever yours and yours alone, but no one will ever see it. That’s how I learned that putting anything into the world makes us vulnerable. And yes, it’s worth it even still. And yes, the Rabbis were right that we should do what we can to teach and speak *b’shem omro*, crediting the person who taught or inspired us whenever we can.

But still, aren’t the Rabbis overstating the point when they say that speaking in the name of another person brings redemption to the world? Is that not a stretch?

Here's one way to understand it: *none of us* stands separate and apart from the rest of humanity. Even the most brilliant ideas, art, and poetry all grow out of seeds planted by someone who came before us.

I imagine some might reject this idea, so attached as we are to the myth of the lone genius. But I find it deeply inspiring. It reinforces that we—like those glorious Aspen Trees—are all one great, big, living organism, connected to one another by complex root systems mostly invisible to the naked eye, but ever-present, nonetheless. Yes, even or especially in this time of division, polarization and alienation, there's something very powerful about affirming that we are all intimately and inextricably connected to one another: past, present and future.

Last summer, David and I saw an exhibit at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts called: *From Africa to the Americas: Picasso*. I think it's fair to say that art after Picasso was like music after the Beatles—these artists so profoundly shifted the paradigm that it's not even really possible to peel away the layers of their influence on everyone who came after.

But what's rarely told is how Picasso was deeply influenced by African art, which he encountered early in his career. He once [wrote](#): “The greatest artistic emotion I have felt was when I was suddenly struck by the sublime beauty of the sculptures carved by anonymous artists in Africa. Passionately religious, yet rigorously logical, these works are the most powerful and most beautiful things ever produced by the human imagination.”

In a bold rereading of art history, this exhibit juxtaposed Picasso's masterpieces to the African sculptures that inspired him. It's a stunning act of truth-telling: obvious, essential and long overdue, as African influence on western culture has so often been ignored and rendered invisible. And it forces you to consider: even Picasso—the greatest of the great—didn't conceive of his bizarre, extraordinary representation of the human form in isolation from the world. Of course, the “anonymous” artists who inspired him weren't really anonymous at all—they were men and women of exceptional talent whose contributions had simply gone unrecognized. And they, too, were influenced by those who came before them.

That's the beautiful, mysterious power of human connectedness. Any one of us could share an idea that might affect another, and then another, and then another. I talked to my friend Lorne Buchman about this—he's the President of Pasadena ArtsCenter College of Design. He said: “Creativity itself is always a kind of dialogue over time, a continuing conversation with new layers, shades, and perspectives woven together in an ever-evolving exploration.” Acknowledging influence doesn't diminish your achievement, it only reflects how deeply bound up you are in the bond of life.

And now I see the mitzvah of speaking *b'shem omro*—in someone else's name—as adding even an additional layer of beauty, mystery and holiness to our lives.

A story from the Talmud (Yevamot 96b-97a):

A young Rabbi went into the *beit midrash*, the study hall, and taught a lesson, something he had learned from his teacher, R' Yohanan. But—whether from absent-mindedness or arrogance—he neglected to teach it in R' Yohanan's name. R' Yohanan heard about this and was outraged.

He stewed in his anger for a while. Too long. The other Rabbis began to worry, and sent students to placate him by talking about the danger of holding grudges. One after the next, they failed to appease him.

Finally, one colleague went before R' Yohanan and reassured him: even when your student doesn't say your name, everyone knows everything he's saying is based on what he learned from you. And when R' Yohanan heard this, he felt much better.

But the Rabbis are troubled. They ask: Why was R' Yohanan *really* so angry about this slight? Because he fully believed that when you speak a person's name, her spirit stays alive even after her death. It's as if she herself is speaking, even from the next world. Even from the grave, R' Yohanan said, her lips flutter as you speak her words.

It turns out, R' Yohanan wasn't motivated by hubris or pettiness. He wasn't interested in the royalties or syndication checks. Instead, he fundamentally understood that teaching, speaking and acting in someone's name is the way that we keep them alive in this world, even after they die. This is how a person achieves eternal life.

Please excuse my hutzpah in speaking about this, tonight, with many people in this room who have a PhD in Grief. But I feel a profound sense of urgency in sharing two lessons I learned about grief and love from Ruby and Hart themselves, and which I offer *b'shem amram*, in their names, and in their memory.

Hart won the bar mitzvah lottery when he landed on Parashat Tazria-Metzora a year and a half ago, a lengthy exploration of contagious, erupting skin lesions. It's not exactly the easiest for kids (or rabbis) to make meaning of. He was troubled by the Torah's insistence that a *metzora*, a person afflicted with the mysterious skin disease—*tzaraat*—must go out into community and declare himself "Unclean! Unclean!" Hart thought that it was unfair that on top of dealing with illness, this person was also to be shamed in front of the whole community. He struggled with this idea, until he read an interpretation that likened the *metzora* back then to a person with anxiety or depression today. This made more sense—Hart could see how people struggling with mental illness might withdraw from community. He saw, too, how that withdrawal could contribute to the stigma around the illness, and further distance the person suffering from the very help she needs. He ultimately realized that only when a person steps forward and makes herself vulnerable by sharing her struggle with people she can trust, might she be embraced with love and support.

Hart spoke so courageously about the anxiety epidemic in America today. "In this room of 300 people," Hart said, "one of every four people is struggling with anxiety. Add in the political climate, and the fact that most of us are Jewish, and I'd say it's more like one in three," a line he delivered perfectly. What Hart learned from the parasha was that when people are hurting, we're often desperate to keep our pain private. But that's precisely when it's more important than ever that we open up. Everyone struggles with some version of *tzaraat*, he said, whether it's a physical, mental or spiritual struggle. So talking about it, he said, "helps the whole community, not just the afflicted."

After he spoke, I told Hart that speaking so openly about these inner struggles, not being afraid to talk about where the pain lives, was an act of *pikuah nefesh*. He just might have saved the life of someone in that room that day. I still believe that to be true.

What we didn't realize at the time, was that he was not only teaching us about how to hold loved ones struggling with anxiety and depression, but how to hold immeasurable grief. It is exactly in the moment of the most profound, burning pain, that we want to self-quarantine. In this way, grieving a death functions similarly to other forms of grief—like after the end of a marriage, or when struggling with illness. With each new person we encounter, we have to experience the freshness of the anguish in our hearts again and again. Thus, the instinct to stay away. Somehow, Hart, as a 13-year-old, had the unusual sensitivity to recognize that.

I talk a lot about *Kaddish Yatom*, the Mourner's Kaddish, and my strong sense that its secret power lies in the fact that it's really a container to hold sacred dialogue between a mourner and the community. The one with the broken heart starts: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah* – in other words: *I'm broken*.

And whole community says: *Amen*. She doesn't even finish her first sentence before we interrupt to say, *We're right here. You're not alone*.

B'alma divra khirutei v'yamlikh malkhutei, she goes on... *ba'agalah u'vizman kariv v'imru*:

Amen. We're still here. We know our job is not to make you feel better, to distract you from your pain. We're never going to pretend things are ok when they're not. Instead, we're just going to sit down beside you in the darkness for as long as you need.

A few years ago on Kol Nidre, I called this the *Amen Effect*—the power of ritual to help the community hold us when all we want is to do is disappear. I imagine Hart looking at Mourner's Kaddish, and thinking: How cruel to have the very people who are hurting the most stand up in a room of seated people and say out loud: *Yitgadal v'yitkadash*, these terrible words that echo generations of pain. How unfair! Have they not suffered enough?

And yet, I now imagine Hart would say: don't you see? It's precisely when you're hurting that you *need* to step forward! As awful as it is, it's only when we proclaim Unclean! Unclean! Broken! Shattered! Devastated!... that we can be held the way we need and deserve to be.

A second lesson. At the funeral, I told a story from the Talmud about R' Akiva, who is travelling on a boat that is shipwrecked. One of his colleagues sees the wreckage and is convinced that his friend has died. He is plunged into grief.

But then that friend gets home, and he finds R' Akiva teaching Torah. "I don't understand!" he says to R' Akiva. "Who brought you up from the water?"

R' Akiva answers that when the ship crashed, everything around him was shattered. He grabbed onto one plank of wood that floated by, and he clung to it. "Holding it tight," he tells his friend, "I bowed my head with each wave that came toward me, and let it pass over me knowing I'd be brought back to the surface." (Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 121a)

That day I said that even though everything was truly shattered, in that room there were hundreds of planks floating by: family, friends and community. Grab hold of us, I said, and I promise we'll do our best to help you catch your breath after each wave passes over.

I didn't know, that day, how important the wave imagery would become over the next few months. A few weeks later, Gail and Colin shared a brilliant and beautiful essay Ruby had written earlier that year about her own experience navigating the waves. Gail and Colin will read this essay in full tomorrow, at Yizkor, our memorial service. But for tonight, I want to teach its essence, in Ruby's name.

Ruby loved the ocean. She writes of the mix of anticipation and danger as she steps into the water on a beautiful, blue-sky day. The waves are rough, and before long, a wall of water rumbles towards her. She takes a deep breath, and dives to the ocean floor, waiting for the wave to pass above her. Sometimes, it passes quickly and she reemerges, unharmed. But sometimes, the force is so great that she tumbles and turns in the darkness, unable to tell which way is up.

She writes so vividly about the terror of not knowing when the wave will pass, and only praying that it does. But the instant she resurfaces, gasping for air, she's already scanning the sea for the next wave. Again she is thrashed about, her body slammed against the hard-packed sand. She is left battered, mind and body. Finally, she emerges and gasps for air. "I wonder, will the next wave come? It feels both inevitable and impossible at the same time..." But by now Ruby knows the ocean—and knows that the only way to survive the next wave is to "swim forward to meet it."

Ruby wrote about the ocean, but she was really writing about the struggle of living with and learning to overcome anxiety and OCD. What she could not have known is that she was also writing a guidebook for surviving unrelenting grief. She was signaling to Gail and Colin, and to all of us—what we must do when the waves are devastating and unyielding. Ruby knew: you cannot outsmart the ocean of grief. Sometimes, you can dive under, and find your way back to surface. But the waves are unpredictable—any one of them can drag you across the ground and flip you around, knocking you into the deepest, darkest, most breathless place you've ever been.

But when you're there, Ruby is teaching us, when you are lost and broken and beaten, you must remember that grief is not to be escaped, but experienced. You know what's bearing down on you is massive, but you dive into it anyway. You have no choice. And eventually, you must remember, eventually this wave, too, will pass. You will breathe again. You will again feel the heat of the sun on your face as you float in the calm of the sea, just past the breakers.

So Hart teaches that we are not to hide, even when we most want to. The support we need can't come to us if we self-isolate. We can't take the pain away, the community says with its embrace, but please let us love you. And feed you. And hear you. And hold you.

And Ruby? Grief comes in waves. Rogue waves. You can't overcome them; your only option is to swim forward to meet them. But when you do—as R' Akiva would say—be sure to grab hold of something, some plank, some friend, a lifeline. And trust when you go under that you'll be brought back to surface, again and again.

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We've been talking this season about the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel. He's heading home after twenty years away, when he learns that his brother Esav is heading toward him with four hundred soldiers. Jacob is terrified. He spends the night alone, but when he is most vulnerable, a stranger attacks him, and the two wrestle until morning. It's the most intense struggle of his life, and Jacob has seen

struggle—with his brother, his father, his father-in-law. This time, he has met his match. The stranger is strong, fierce, unyielding.

They wrestle for hours. Jacob is badly injured—his hip is dislocated. But then, the moment the dawn begins to break, the stranger shouts: שִׁלְחֵנִי כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר—*Let me go! The dawn is breaking!* Jacob, though, has a strong intuition that this fight doesn't just end with battle scars. He grabs the stranger with all his might, and insists: לֹא אֶשְׁלַחְךָ כִּי אִם־בְּרַכְתֵּנִי—*I will not let you go until you bless me* (Genesis 32:27).

Jacob has been through hell. He knows that in this sunrise, at the end of his long, dark night of exile, even when the wrestling has left him exhausted and injured physically and psychically, some good has got to come.

He gets his blessing. The stranger, who turns out to be an angel, a servant of the Holy One, gives him a new name, a new sense of self-understanding. A new identity. לֹא יֵעֲקֹב יִאֲמַר עוֹד שְׁמִי כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל—*No longer will it be said that you are Jacob. You are now Yisrael— one who wrestles with God and man, and survives* (Genesis 32:29).

The battle behind him, Jacob now approaches Esav in a spirit of reconciliation.

All summer, I've been circling around this story. I will not let you go, until you bless me. It's so human, what Jacob asks for: I need you to show me how there is still good, even in a world of hurt.

To be clear: this doesn't mean that suffering comes to us so we can receive blessings. That is a cruel theology—I do not believe in a God who makes us hurt so we can learn life lessons. And I really don't believe in a God who makes *other people* hurt so we can learn lessons.

But now I wonder: What morning? After some losses, especially after traumatic loss, isn't it too facile to speak of the break of dawn? And is it a betrayal—of the pain, of the ones we've lost, of our own suffering—to look up from the battlefield in order to even try to catch a glimpse of some blessing? To laugh again, to love again, even to eat again. All of these can feel like an act of disloyalty.

The passage of time—as I've learned from Ellen and Hanne and Karen and so many of you—may see the waves of grief coming less frequently, and they may be less formidable. But even time doesn't stop the rumbling of the ocean. We may still be hit, and even subsumed, by waves of grief even many years later.

I talked to Jesse and Amit, Gidi's parents about this. Maybe it's not the Blessings that Came in the Morning, they suggested, but the Blessings that Came in the Night. Because there are always blessings, even when the night never ends.

My friend [Rev. Najuma Smith-Pollard](http://www.ikar-la.org) is here with us tonight. Najuma has been a teacher for me in so many ways—aside from being a prophetic preacher and courageous fighter for justice, this past year she also became a grieving parent. Her son, Daniel S. Brown, was shot and killed in Las Vegas last fall. He was 24. Najuma is a woman of faith. She found holy currents running everywhere, even in the midst of terrible tragedy. It started with the nurse who greeted her at the trauma center and shared with her a verse from Proverbs 3:5 (“Trust the Lord with all your heart...”) and extended to what Najuma calls the *ministry of presence*—the many friends that walked with her and her family through their grief.

For Najuma, the blessing that came in the night was very clear: Daniel became an organ donor, saving five people's lives. As Najuma [said](#):

"I had one request of the [organ] donor foundation... that someone would get his heart, because Daniel had a good heart. We got word that that someone was a 22-year-old young man, which means that his family will not have to go through what we're going through, that he'll get to live. I know what it means to ask God for a miracle for your child. Daniel was this baby's miracle. Let's let our living and our dying never be in vain."

Walter Breuggeman once wrote, "After the unthinkable end comes unimaginable beginnings. An embrace of ending permits beginning." I want to believe that's what drove Jacob too. Not the fantasy of a fresh start, but the realization that even in the unthinkable ends, there are new beginnings.

And even still, I can't stop thinking of R' Yohanan, and his insistence that we teach, speak and live *b'shem omro*. How did he know the redemptive power of this practice? What did he see that the other Rabbis did not? And then I remember. R' Yohanan was not only the beautiful, brilliant teacher, the renowned founder of his Rabbinic academy in Tiveria and the author of thousands of decisions recorded in the Talmud. He was also a bereaved parent (Brakhot 5b). The Talmud tells us that he suffered inconceivable loss—the death of multiple children. And while he continued to teach, and bring healing, and render legal decisions... while he had a long and fruitful life, he carried his children with him everywhere. That's how he knew that speaking in someone's name is what grants them eternal life. For him it wasn't theory, it was personal obligation, to his own beloved children.

Over the past few months, I have learned that when we speak, live, and act *b'shem omro*—in the name of the one who is gone, we can create the space for the blessings to eventually flow. Something new is breathed into even the bleakest night when we allow ourselves to tell the sacred stories, to live in the light of the goodness that was and still is.

So here's the lesson we may not need to be reminded of this year: We don't know what the year ahead has in store for us. We don't know what tomorrow has in store. But we do know that it is our life's work to lift up the light of those who dwell in the place where the righteous go: to teach their words, to honor them, to remember them. To say their names. And when we do, I fully believe that they feel the echoes of our words and our actions too. It is what grants them, and all of us, life eternal.

G'mar hatimah tovah – May this holy day bring comfort, consolation and blessing to us all.