

IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

*Talking about dying, death, grief and what comes after
can imbue our lives with meaning, purpose and love.*

Kol Nidre

*Only the supremely brave ever admit
How helpless they are in the hands of God!
As for the others, building and decorating their sandcastles –
Look how one wild wave shatters them all.*

Jalal-ud-Din Rumi

This is a sermon about death and love. It is about how denial of death is actually a denial of life, because confronting death, rather than hiding from it, can imbue our lives with meaning and purpose and can remind us of the eternal power of love.

I have been waiting to give this sermon for almost a year. And then, just in the last month, two tragic deaths have struck our community. To Jesse and Amit, to your sons Zeve and Oren and your folks, Linda and Lester, we hold such deep sorrow for all of you, knowing only a glimpse of the pain you have suffered over the past five weeks since Gidi died, on Labor Day weekend. I would give anything to help lift some of the pain away, but I know full well that none of us can take it away, we can only try to meet you in the darkness, cry with you and sing with you and remind you of all the love.

And to Mimi, Eli and Dash. Gary died just two weeks ago. 50 year olds are not supposed to fall asleep on Tuesday night and not wake up Wednesday morning. Gary was a profoundly decent person, kind and compassionate and full of integrity. So many people here loved him, and he loved you deeply. I hope that he somehow feels the deep affection and great admiration that has poured out for him over the past two weeks and tonight.

My friend, Leibl Fein, a luminary, intellectual and activist, lost his daughter Nomi when she was 30-years-old to a sudden heart attack. In his grief, he wrote a beautiful book called “Against the Dying of the Light,” its name taken from the great Welsh poet Dylan Thomas’s words:

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The act of writing in the face of tragic loss, Leibl said, was a way to keep Nomi alive and to accept the fact of her death, both of which he needed desperately to do. I speak tonight to honor Gidi and Gary’s memories, as well as the memories of all those we have lost this past year, in a humble attempt to create space to hold the loss, and at the same time to rage against the dying of the light.

I have told you a little bit about my Grandma Millie’s life and her death. She lived to 98 and while her body had slowed slightly, she still went out for a cocktail and dinner every night, played bridge (and won) every day, had an active social calendar and loved getting angry at the news. She was feisty and spirited and really alive. I flew down to Florida late one night, planning to take her out for breakfast the next morning. Grandma was already asleep when I arrived, but I let myself in and I went to bed in the guest room. I was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of voices in the other room, and ran

out to find her collapsed on the floor beside her bed. “I’m such a dummy, Sharon!” she said. “I fell on my way to the bathroom.” She was trying to get up but the EMTs wouldn’t let her move. They suspected from the position of her leg that she had broken her hip. “The tall one,” grandma whispered to me as they put her on the gurney, “he’s very handsome, isn’t he?”

At the hospital, the doctors consulted (with one another, not us) and quickly determined that she needed to have hip surgery. “She’s 98 years old,” I said. “Are you sure this is our only option?” “Without a doubt,” they said. They assured us that she’s be back to playing bridge in no time at all.

Grandma survived the surgery, but she was not the same person who went in. She was still making jokes and flirting a little, but she was exhausted and in pain. By day two out of surgery, it was clear that the trajectory was not good. And as her situation worsened, her caregivers began to tell her with great urgency about how close she was to recovery. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Gordon—everything’s going to be just fine.” Each time I heard it, I became more and more agitated. It was clear to me—and I’m sure to them—that she was close to the end. No one, not the nurses, the doctors, and ultimately not even I had the courage to tell her that this was it.

Years ago, Atul Gawande, renowned surgeon and writer on issues related to medicine and public health, wrote a groundbreaking piece for the New Yorker called “Letting Go.” The article is a full-frontal attack on the American medical system for its failure to properly care for people at the end of life, instead pushing them toward expensive and painful treatments that *may* delay death, but *certainly* diminish the quality of life. He argues that longevity ought not be the singular goal... that quality of life, freedom from pain and mental awareness are far more important to most people, but the medical system is simply not designed to accommodate those priorities.

Gawande shares a story that has stuck with me for many years about a palliative care doctor he works with named Susan Block. Palliative care, for those who are unfamiliar, is specialized medical care that focuses on providing relief not only from the symptoms but also the stress of a serious illness. The goal is to improve quality of life—physically, spiritually, psychologically—for patients and families toward the end. Block trains doctors to have honest conversations with patients about what they are living for and how, if given the choice, they want to die. She has guided thousands through those difficult conversations in her tenure as a palliative care doc.

At some point, Block got word that her father, a professor at Berkeley, had been diagnosed with a mass growing in the spinal cord of his neck. The surgery to remove the mass was risky, and was likely to leave him paralyzed from the neck down. She flew out to see him the night before the surgery and they sat together and chatted before she said goodbye and left for the night. She was driving away on the Bay Bridge when she realized that she—an expert in end-of-life conversations and care—had avoided talking to her own father about what really mattered to him. In desperation, she turned the car around and drove back to the hospital. (I don’t know if such a thing is possible, but when I read the story then and even as I tell it now, I imagine Dr. Block making a u-turn on the Bay Bridge).

She raced back up to his room and said: “Dad, I need to understand how much you’re willing to go through to have a shot at being alive and what level of being alive is tolerable to you.” Her father told her that as long as he could eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV, he’d be willing to stay alive. She was astonished—she had never in her life seen him watch a football game! How much did she learn that she would have never known, just by having the conversation.

I read that story six years ago, and I think of it all the time. We live in a death denying culture. Avoidance and repression are the names of the game—we presume that we simply couldn't function were we to live in constant awareness of how close we all stand to the edge. A former editor of the New York Times Styles Section called the US a nation of beauty junkies, addicts searching perpetually for the next fix to keep us looking young and gorgeous. And let's be honest, folks, we are at the epicenter here in Los Angeles. It's not our fault, it's the culture and time we live in, but it's important to understand what's actually happening. We fear that getting old will render us irrelevant and one step closer to the grave. It's as if with every nip and tuck and dye we are postponing aging and therefore magically holding death at bay.

We come up with all kinds of diversions to distract ourselves from the ultimate reality of death, so much so that when death inevitably collides with life we are shocked and completely ill-equipped to deal with it.

Maybe that's why I was so moved when I met Michael Hebb two years ago in Park City, Utah, at a REBOOT summit. Within the first two minutes of our schmooze over drinks and dessert he told me the story of the death of his father. (My husband, David, always says that the thing about schmoozing a rabbi is that there's very little room for chit-chat. Even in a bar.) Michael's father was suffering from Alzheimers and was being cared for in a nursing home. One night, when Michael was 12 years old, he bolted out of bed with a start. He looked at the clock—it was 343am—and went back to sleep. In the morning, he learned that his father had died in the night; inexplicably, 343am was the official time of death.

I couldn't shake the 343am detail. Just a few months earlier, one of you had told me that at the precise moment your mother died, you saw the drapes in her room rustle gently, even though there was no breeze. And another of you here tonight described a kind of blue light that you saw rising above your mother's head after she took her final breath. Just last month one of you shared that a bird flew into your office the day after your mother's death, circled over your head three times and then flew out, leaving you with the distinct impression that she was with you, even still. I think about my dear friend whose electrical appliances keep breaking, who feels certain—even though she doesn't believe in any of this stuff—that her sister, who died years ago, is trying to send her some kind of message. I thought of the kind couple driving me to the airport after I did a scholar-in-residence in their shul. When we stopped at a traffic light, they held hands and looked at one another, tears in their eyes. Then they looked back at me. "I hope you don't find this strange," they said. "But we lost our son in a car accident on this road a few years ago, and every time we get to this light, we feel his presence. Like he's reaching out to us, telling us that he's ok."

What do we do with these stories? File them among inexplicable things that happen that you need to tell *someone*, so you tell the rabbi because you know at least she won't think you're crazy.

I brought one book with me to Park City, Rabbi Elie Spitz's *Does the Soul Survive*. It sat on my shelf for many years; I randomly grabbed it as my companion for the weekend.

That night, I couldn't sleep and I began to read. Spitz writes that most rabbis—even really good ones—are reluctant to speak about immortality, the soul, the afterlife, reincarnation. We chalk up reports of mysterious moments to strange occurrences, and speak instead about building a life of meaning in *this* world, and perpetuating the lives of loved ones by honoring their memories. And that's not wrong, it's just not nearly the whole picture. In limiting the conversation to the here and now, Spitz argues that we deprive ourselves and our congregants of ancient Jewish wisdom on alternative levels of consciousness, the mysteries of life and death, the soul as a dimension of existence.

Did you know that it's a widely held Talmudic idea that after death, the soul, separated from the body, might have a fully conscious existence? That in the Middle Ages, Jewish philosophers believed that the soul was "unique and immortal, and it entered the body to fulfill a particular task for that life" (Spitz, 31)? That's not something that I learned in religious school, or even Rabbinical School, for that matter, where I never once heard that the survival of the soul or reincarnation were serious Jewish ideas.

The next morning at breakfast, I told Michael how moved I was by our conversation, what a relief it was to speak so frankly about loss and grief and the mysteries of death. Michael told me about a project he built called DeathOverDinner.org, premised on the idea that we need to find a way to talk honestly and openly about the most painful and most universal human experience: death. And why not do it over really good food and wine? Within two years of launching the project, a couple hundred thousand death dinners have happened across the country and around the world, and participants write that their experiences—rather than leaving them scared and depressed—have been nothing short of life affirming.

It was immediately clear to me that we needed to do something together... we needed to create a Death Over Dinner: Jewish Edition, that would break the taboo around death and turn the dinner table into a sacred space to share and laugh and cry together.

I wanted our community to have the resources to tap into ancient Jewish ideas about the soul and the afterlife, conversations we all too often avoid out of ignorance and a general unease.

And it's not only the afterlife. I wanted to create the space for soulful, informed conversations about end of life care, living wills, advanced directives and health care proxies. How does Judaism advise that we approach decisions around feeding tubes and respirators? Organ donation? How long do we fight to preserve life, and when do we let someone go with dignity? What do you do when family members are estranged or disagree on treatment? We need to have these conversations not only so that our families know our wishes (as one friend in palliative care likes to say, "*It's always too early to have the conversation, until it's too late*"), but also because somehow talking about dying reminds us that we are still living.

I wanted for us to become more knowledgeable about Jewish traditions around death, dying and burial, which are some of the most meaningful and powerful rituals we have.

And, perhaps most importantly, I wanted to make the space for conversations that would help us be more present when we or someone we love suffers a loss or approaches death so that we'll be better friends, family members, community members when we walk one another through chapters of grief and loss. How do I show up for someone I love? What should I say when there are no words, and, even more to the point, what should I *not* say?

We've spent the past year working with an incredible team of rabbis, palliative care doctors, hospice workers and psychologists to curate the best, most accessible and most inspiring material to help guide us through conversations about dying and death and grief and soul. And now, in partnership with DeathOverDinner and Reboot and powered by a generous grant from the Jewish Community Foundation, our new site is ready to go. It's our hope that everyone in our community—and many beyond—will participate in a death dinner over the coming year.

It was clear that we had to launch this project on Yom Kippur, the annual Jewish deep dive into our mortality, the one moment when we step out of the death denying culture we live in and peer, with open eyes and heart, into the deep. Every year we talk about how the rituals of this day create for us a deathscape—we don't eat or drink, we wear white, we immerse in the memories of loved ones who have died. We repeat the words *who will live and who will die*, wrestling with the realization that the stark and bitter and awful reality is that some of us will be here next year and some will not.

Yom Kippur is rooted in the assumption that we have more clarity around what matters most when we're on the edge of life. So we go there, together, in order to ask ourselves the questions of the palliative care doctors: what matters most to you, now? And what will you do about it?

This is painful stuff, and it's very real. Yom Kippur is one big, collective, U-turn on the Bay Bridge. This is our chance to go back, to turn around (*te-shuvah*) and do and say what needs to be said before it's too late. Doing this with a full and open heart won't take away our grief. It won't heal our broken hearts. But the premise of this holy day is that an honest confrontation with our vulnerability will help us live with deeper meaning and purpose and greater love.

Paul Kalanithi writes a beautiful memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*, about his struggle as a 36-year-old rising star neurosurgeon who is diagnosed with fatal lung cancer. He writes that "the shadow of death obscured the meaning of any action..." until he found his mantra one day, from the words of Samuel Beckett: "*I can't go on. I'll go on.*" He gets out of bed and takes a step forward, repeating the phrase over and over: *I can't go on. I'll go on.*

That morning, I made a decision: I would... have to learn to live in a different way, seeing death as an imposing itinerant visitor but knowing that even if I'm dying, until I actually die, I am still living. (150)

We can't go on. We'll go on. All of us will die, but most of us are not actively dying today. And yet, we are brought to confront the fragility of our sandcastles because our tradition, in its wisdom, recognizes the need to remind us that until we actually die, we are alive.

After working in hospice and palliative care for 25 years and emergency medicine for 15 years, Dr. Ira Byock has worked with thousands of dying patients and their families. Based on the wisdom he has acquired working with people at the end of life, he has identified what he calls The Four Things That Matter Most:

Please forgive me.

I forgive you.

Thank you.

I love you.

I have come to understand that the whole point of this liturgy and this music and these rituals and this fast is to bring us to the edge of life so that we can find the will and the urgency and the courage to say what needs to be said *now*, while we still can. To overcome that deeply embedded cultural urge to hide from the reality of our vulnerability and realize that for all that we can't control in our lives and the world, we can ask for forgiveness, we can forgive. We can thank and we can love.

Angelo Merendino and his wife, Jen, were married for only five months when she was diagnosed with cancer. As she started to get really sick, they felt that they had to find a way to communicate to friends and family what they were going through, but words were failing so he began to photograph her. In the end, he created a photo-documentary offering a brutal and beautiful and intimate window into their battle with cancer. After Jen's death, he started a foundation to help support women fighting breast cancer, which he called The Love We Share, inspired by one of their last conversations. In his words:

"Before going to sleep Jen and I used to ask each other what the best and worst part of the day was. Usually the best part was something like, "When you walked by me and ran your fingers through my hair," or, "When we were at the hospital and you held my hand." The day after we found out Jen's liver was failing we came home with Hospice Care and spent the evening with family and friends. That night, as we lay next to each other for possibly the last time, I asked Jen what she loved the most about that day. Jen thought for a minute then turned and, looking deeper into my eyes than ever before, Jen said, 'I loved it all.'"

In the end, there is only love. When the soul has left the body and the burial is over and the crowds have gone home, what's left is love.

In our tradition, the act of burying a loved one, actually lifting earth to cover a coffin, is an act of ritual defiance to the culture of death denial. The sound of earth hitting the top of a coffin is the starkest and most powerful and painful awakening to the reality and finality of death. It is also considered *hesed shel emet*, the deepest and purest act of love. And as I have now stood with many of you as we place earth, gently and lovingly, on parents and grandparents, on friends and even on children, I know that you know exactly the power of that gift of love.

From birth, we have a deep, irrepressible need for human connection. And it's with us to the very end. *Utzrur bitzrur ha-hayim*, we say in *Eil Malei Rahamim*—*May his soul be bound up in the bond of life*. At the graveside, standing over our dead, we suddenly remember that we are all connected to one another, in this world and beyond. We remember that life's great calling is for us to recognize and honor above all else the love that manifests that sacred connection. To love deeply and to let ourselves be

loved deeply, that is how we are bound up in the bond of life. As Roger Cohen once wrote, "The living are the custodians of the souls of the dead... Love bequeaths this responsibility."¹

It's really, really hard to remember the depths of human connectedness, to remember that what matters most is running fingers through your loved one's hair. So tonight and tomorrow we stand to be reminded.

The new school year has started, the election is upon us. Yet today we take a day out of life to remind ourselves that when all is said and done, whether we get to live 85 years on this earth or 50 or 5, what's left is love.

Today we go together to the brink. Not to punish ourselves, not to wallow in grief, but to remember that we even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, our work is to live... and to live with a vengeance. *We can't go on. We'll go on.* Today we commit to living with forgiveness, with gratitude and most importantly, with love. Because in the end, that is what it means to be bound up in the bond of life.

G'mar hatimah tovah –

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/opinion/cohen-from-death-into-life.html?_r=0