



WHAT MATTERS MOST

*Some reflections on ending well, and what we pray will never end,
offered on my father's shloshim—the end of the most intense period of mourning.*

Rosh Hashanah I, 5784 – September 15, 2023

I begin this sermon at my father's desk, sitting in the quiet of the house that for the past week has overflowed with laughter and love, babka and broken sugar cookies, and which—the week before that—was filled with song and silence, babka and broken sugar cookies.¹

Everyone has left. I feel compelled by an inexplicable force to sit in my father's chair, even though this runs counter to the *halakha*: we are to show respect to our parents by leaving their seats empty—both in life and in death. You wouldn't dare to sit on the king's throne, or the President's chair in the Oval Office—so don't disrespect your parent by sitting in his chair either.²

We all quietly intuited this throughout the week—even those who didn't know the law avoided his chair at the dining room table unless and until there were no other seats available. Once, unknowing, one of the little ones sat in the seat that I'm now in, and my girls, a few years older, rebuked them... *Get out of Pop's chair!*

But I want to sit here. I want to feel the leather cushion that enfolded him every day, especially as he grew increasingly unsteady on his feet, and he'd land with a gentle, grateful thud into the welcoming embrace of the seat.

His reading glasses rest just so, against the pack of tissues to the right.

I think of the endless hours my father spent here over the past fifteen years since he and my mother moved west, pondering the most advantageous ways to give, invest and save, thinking about how to delight, support and surprise his children and grandchildren and each other.

I think of the emails he would open each day on this desktop—his portal to the world left behind when they moved here. Jokes from old college buddies, missives from his brother,

¹ The doctor and my mother prohibited my father from eating cookies years ago, but my dad found a loophole in *broken* cookies—which would otherwise go to waste. So for years we conspired to break all the cookies in the house whenever mom wasn't looking.

² *Rambam, Sefer ha-Mitzvos 211.20. Y.D. 240:2.*

desperate, last-gasp fundraising attempts from his (blessedly) former political party, along with the mountain of IKAR emails that somehow always got one detail completely wrong, which—believe me—our team always heard about...

I look at the piles of unopened mail, remembering how just a couple of weeks ago I found my father sitting in this chair, his hand trembling as he struggled to open an envelope as if its contents held the answers to the great mysteries of the universe, when in fact it turned out to just be a solicitation from the American Heart Association.

I remember him sitting here when Sami and I visited a few months ago, and he asked her to help him undo the clip on his fanny pack after his fingers had lost all agility. He was mortified to realize just how profoundly his body was betraying him.

In this chair, I can see him, I can smell traces of his after shave, I can almost touch him. He's so close to me... the line between death and life is so thin that for a moment I am certain it's all an illusion and we are here and we are there, in this world and the next, all at the same time. And the only question is whether or not we have the courage to admit that that's the case.

In *shiva*, the community is charged with creating a container to hold the grief of the *aveilim*, the mourners, as we begin the sacred work of recovery—trying to piece together the complexity, mystery and sometimes majesty of our loved ones' lives. This work is a holy, collective excavation project, as we try—through storytelling, photos, honest recounting—to bring back into focus what came before the end, whether the end came abruptly and tragically, or after a prolonged decline.

What we've experienced most recently obviously leaves the strongest impression, and it takes a dedicated effort to dig beyond the dramatic and sometimes traumatic end to rediscover the essence of a person. Instinctively, we have to work our way backward, which often means starting with repeated retellings of the end... in all its detail. Maybe you've experienced this yourselves. I have witnessed many *aveilim* tell and retell where they were when they received the phone call, when the illness took a turn, what the last weeks and final moments were like. This is part of the normal processing of traumatic events... through repetition and storytelling, painful as it is, we assimilate the new information and move closer to acceptance. It's as if in order to make sense of a loved one's life, we first have to try to make sense of their death.

Only then are we able to move back in time. To remember, to reconstruct, to reimagine a person. If we let them, friends, family, therapists, rabbis, *community* can be helpful in this process.

But today, sitting in my father's chair at the end of *shiva*, now deep in the work of remembering and recovering, I find myself drawn once again to the end. The vastness of the experience. The holiness of it.

I am still working my way through the tangle of inputs, gathering sacred hints to try to understand the complex puzzle of life and death, to draw meaning from the overwhelming mix of gratitude and sadness that I'm feeling. Ushering my father through his final days felt at once to be the most singular and also most universal human experience, when life unfolds as it should, according to the natural order of things. He lived 86 years full of laughter and love, joy and angst, illness and recovery and illness again. This was not a catastrophic loss, but a sad and beautiful and blessed one. And as Rosh Hashanah cuts short *shloshim*, the first and most intense thirty days of mourning, I find myself on these Holy Days needing to think and speak with you, my beloved community, about the end. About the way we die, and what it says about who we are and what matters most.

So let's talk about the end.

I have shared with some of you the chance stroke of blessing that landed me by my Grandma Millie's side the last days of her life, years ago. I had flown down to Florida to see her after giving a talk in New York, and shortly after I arrived, she took a bad fall and broke her hip. The doctors insisted she needed surgery, despite my protestations. ("She's 98 years old. Is that really our only option?") She came through the surgery, but was terribly weak. I spent two days holding her hand in the hospital and placing droplets of water on her dry lips, simultaneously mortified and awed by her charming and vaguely inappropriate flirtations with the doctors. (She truly was herself until the very end.) She was deteriorating quickly, but the nurses and caregivers insisted on reassuring her. "Don't worry, Mrs. Gordon," they said. "You'll be playing bridge again in no time."

I know the caregivers were only trying to comfort her. But I wanted to scream, "She is dying! Can't we be honest with her?"

So here's a humbling irony: as a rabbi, it's essentially my job to help people confront their mortality so that we can live more meaningfully and purposefully with the time we have, a message I try to share with great urgency, the central theme of these holy days.

And yet here I was, simultaneously aggrieved by the caregivers' failure to be honest with my grandma, and terrified to do so myself.

Dr. Atul Gawande once shared the story of a palliative care specialist, Susan Block, who trains doctors to have honest conversations with patients about end-of-life decisions and care.³ Block has guided thousands through the hardest conversations: "What are you living for? How do you want to spend whatever time you have left?"

³ Atul Gawande, Letting Go, [The New Yorker](#), July 26, 2010.

But then Block's father, a University of California, Berkeley professor, was diagnosed with a mass growing on his spinal cord. She flew out to see him the night before his surgery, and they sat together and chatted before she said goodnight. 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 know this isn't even possible, but I imagine a dramatic U-turn on the Bay Bridge.)

Block raced back up to her father's room. Breathlessly, she asked him how much he was willing to go through to have a shot at staying alive, and what level of being alive was tolerable to him. Her father told her that as long as he could eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV, he'd be willing to go through a lot of pain, but would want to live. She was astonished . . . football? He had never, in her memory, watched a single game. She learned so much, just by asking and listening.

But too often we don't ask and we don't listen. We don't want to force a confrontation with hard truths. As much as we dread receiving bad news, we *really* don't want to bear it. Nobody wants to press someone who's already suffering to reckon with the reality of imminent death.

Instead, we engage in a kind of collective magical thinking: if we don't talk about it, maybe it won't be real. Rather than confront the precariousness and preciousness of life, we avoid and we evade. But death is a part of life. It is normal. It happens to every single being.

The dying person, deprived of the opportunity to speak honestly about what is happening, is not only denied agency in the end, but also denied our full presence as they go through what for many is the scariest experience of their lives.

And it's not only they—the dying—who lose in a culture that pathologizes death. We, who live, also lose, because death denial keeps us from fully engaging life. If we really knew how close we were to the edge, would we waste time with such meaningless distractions? And even more concretely, death denial creates a spiritual schism between the bereaved—those *forced* to confront the reality of loss—and the community, precisely when community is most needed.

My grandma died on the third day after her fall. It was years ago now, but I still wish I had taken a U-turn on the Bay Bridge. I wish I had told her the truth about where this was heading, given her a chance to decide what her final hours might look like. To narrate her own closing chapter in truth, rather than in a facade of normalcy. Instead, I joined the chorus of false hope. My fear got in the way of my love.

When my father was diagnosed with an aggressive Parkinson's three years ago, I was determined not to make the same mistake.

Instead, I sat down with him when he was still fully possessing his faculties. I took a deep breath and said: *Dad, I hope you live a long time. But this disease is a beast. It creeps through the system, and at some point it will deny you the ability to live independently and to communicate fully. I know this is hard, but I need to ask you now, while you're still fully here: What matters most to you?*

He was not offended. To my surprise, he answered immediately, as if he, too, had been quietly considering this question all along. He had two answers, which I share now with my family's permission:

1. He wanted to be at home, if at all possible.
2. And he wanted to bring joy to my mother, his wife of more than 50 years.

(The ice cream part was implied for my father, always.)

This gave us some good data points. As hard as it would be to care for him at home, we knew we had to do what we could to provide it. That would require advanced planning, saving money, hiring caregivers, installing bars and ramps, and more.

And he wanted not only to stay close to my mother, but to be able to give her joy. That would require a certain amount of agency, cognition and ability.

I asked him this question a couple of years ago, and then checked back every month since then, even up to a week before his death. Yes, those remained, for him, the two most important things.

Consistent with the broader culture, our healthcare system—rooted in death denial—is biased toward longevity, not quality of life. In the words of palliative care expert Dr. BJ Miller—it is designed to *center diseases, not the people living with and dying from them*.⁴ That's how we end up with costly, unnecessary and sometimes painful medical interventions to prolong life, rather than sensitive, creative interventions to help a person live and die with some measure of agency and dignity. Desperate final hours are spent in the ER fighting for a bed, rather than beside beloveds, singing, praying, whispering words of love and care.

Two weeks before my father died, an infection coursed through his body. He—who had been here at Shabbat morning services just two days earlier (and was called up for an *aliyah!*)—was now spiking a fever and had become so weak he could barely lift his head. After several sleepless, traumatic nights in the hospital, he miraculously stabilized, and it became clear that they needed the bed for patients with more acute illness. While we remained concerned, we

⁴ See BJ Miller's [TED Talk](#): *What Really Matters at the End of Life*.

nevertheless gratefully returned home and began to plot gentle therapeutic interventions. Maybe we had dodged a bullet.

But that optimism was short-lived. It was clear to me that my father was dying. His systems were shutting down, and he was suffering.

The Midrash⁵ tells us that when it was time for Aaron to die, God longed to give him the chance to prepare, to die on his own terms, but didn't have the courage to share the sad news. God! So instead, the Holy One turned to Moses: "Do Me a favor and tell Aaron of his death; I am ashamed to do so myself."

Moses had no choice but to comply. The Midrash says that he rose early in the morning and went to Aaron. As artfully and sensitively and lovingly as he could, one brother told the other that his end was near. Aaron's bones felt weak as he confronted the truth of his mortality. But in a final act of agency, Aaron prepared himself for death, until a fog enveloped him and the Divine Presence (the *Shekhinah*) descended and kissed him, and he gently passed from this world.

At one point, as my father's condition worsened, we called the nurse, who told us: *If you're really concerned, call 911. Take him back to Cedars.* In a death denying health care system, this really is the only answer. (As Shimon Peres famously said, if all you have is a hammer, you see the whole world as a nail.) We were clear that there would be no more ambulances, no more hospitals. But choosing not to go meant saying the quiet part out loud. We had to help him transition from this world with love.

The move to hospice care was... transformative.

As Dev, Michael, my mom and I stood with my father at the precipice of life and death, I thought of Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, the great sage who suffered thirteen years of pain and anguish caused by kidney stones and scurvy.⁶

The Talmud invites us right into his final moments.⁷ Rabbi Yehudah is on his deathbed. He is suffering. He is dying. But the Rabbis can't bear to lose him. Caught in the grips of their own death denial, they decree that anyone who even dares to suggest "Rabbi is dying" will be stabbed with a sword. That's how much they don't want to confront the reality of this imminent loss.

⁵ Yalkut Shimoni, Hukkat 76.

⁶ Bava Metzia 85a.

⁷ Ketubot 104a.

They fast. They pray fervently for God's mercy: *Please, let him live!* They will not allow this great man to part from them.

Rabbi has, by his side, a caregiver. She, too, wants Rabbi to live. But even as she prays, *We're not ready to lose him! Just give us a little more time!*, she perceives that he is being tugged between two realities, that the upper realms and the lower realms are competing for his soul.

The more time the caregiver spends by Rabbi Yehudah haNasi's side, the more she witnesses his suffering. Specifically, the Talmud tells us she sees how it pains him to go to the bathroom. She sees the exhaustion, the indignity. It is wrenching.

So again she prays, but this time, with a different intention: *May it be Your will*, she says, *that Rabbi Yehudah is able to transition from this world peacefully.*

But the Rabbis are relentless. They won't let him go! And their grasp on his soul, their refusal to give him permission to die, is keeping Rabbi suspended in an anguished limbo.

So the caregiver takes matters into her own hands. Climbing to the rooftop, she grasps a *kuza*, a ceramic jug, and throws it to the ground. The sound of broken pottery distracts the Rabbis for just a brief moment... and as they gaze at the shards, Rabbi Yehudah's soul ascends to the heavens. He has died. He is finally at peace.

I love that the Rabbis' profound misunderstanding of what is actually needed—their selfish attempts to hold their beloved teacher in this world even when it was time for him to go—is recorded for all time... *in the Rabbinic literature*. And I love that it is an unnamed caregiver—a woman!—who truly understands what only God already knew: the mercy R' Yehudah haNasi really needed was not prolonged life, but compassionate death. She only knew this by standing in the breach. By paying attention not to what *she* needed, but to what Rabbi's soul needed.

In a quiet moment, I shared this story with my mother. It gave her comfort as we shifted our own thinking—and our prayers, as we reoriented from *medical-interventions-in-the-service-of-death-avoidance* to *natural death* to *compassionate death*. This gave us permission to hold my father with love and grant him release, rather than jealously scramble to hold every last second.

The first thing the hospice nurse told us embodies the torah of compassionate end of life care. "Take off the oximeter," she said—referring to the mechanism we were checking incessantly to gauge his oxygen and pulse. "Don't look at the numbers, look at the person."

In compassionate care, we have two priorities:

First, *we strive to create the conditions for physical comfort.*

We work to reduce suffering as much as possible. We make space for what Dr. Miller calls “primal sensorial delights”—in our case, my father was permitted a reunion with his beloved ice cream—which had been deemed dangerous to his long term health but was pointless to deny him now. “Our goal,” the hospice team told us, “is no longer nutrition or long term health. It’s sensory gratification. If it makes him happy, give it to him.” It made him happy.

And second, *we create the conditions for spiritual comfort.*

Here our Jewish tradition meets and marries the hospice toolkit. About a decade ago, I met Dr. Ira Byock, another leading voice in hospice and palliative care. After traversing the final chapter with thousands of dying people and their families, he identified what he calls *The Four Things That Matter Most*.⁸ I have shared this with many of you over the years:

Please forgive me.
I forgive you.
Thank you.
I love you.

Of course, Byock explains that the four things apply all the time, not only when death is imminent. But I realized that they happen to embody the very essence of our somewhat impenetrable deathbed *vidui*, or confessional, the final words our traditional liturgy guides us to impart before we die, or on behalf of the dying. The goal is grace. Wonder. Spiritual connection. Soul preparedness.

So some years ago, I attempted a new liturgy, simple and accessible, that interweaves Byock’s wisdom with our ancient Jewish wisdom.⁹ It gives us words when there are no words. It supports us in overcoming the deeply embedded cultural urge to hide, deny and repress, and instead helps us embrace our vulnerability. It reminds us that for all that we can’t control, we can choose forgiveness, we can thank, and we can love.

This liturgy—which our family said over and over for the full week my father was in hospice care—allowed us to embrace those final moments with tender, open hearts.

Of course, even thinking about “ending well” is a privilege. There are sudden losses that tear us from our loved ones with no choice and no mercy. I am deeply humbled by the unthinkable tragedies some in this room have had to endure. Geographical and emotional distance also sometimes preclude the possibility of sacred accompaniment. And of course, in just the past

⁸ See Ira Byock’s *Four Things that Matter Most*.

⁹ [A Prayer for Release: Vidui and Verses](#)

few weeks, we witnessed the convulsions of human heartache rippling from Maui to Morocco and Libya, whole worlds turned upside down with no glimmer of agency or grace.

Even still, there is a movement to rethink and ultimately redesign how we talk about death, and how we die. What does it mean to bring honesty and agency into the death experience, when we are able? To shift from a medical mindset to a compassion mindset? To talk about and live by what truly matters most? These are questions I think we all must take seriously.

In his dying days, as we sat quiet vigil in my parents' house, I held three books in my hands: one to review the *halakhot* of death and mourning, one to contemplate the ancient wisdom of consolation, from Michael Ignatieff, and the stunning, poetic memoir of Elizabeth Alexander, written after the sudden, tragic death of her beloved four days after his 50th birthday. Hour to hour, I carried these three books wherever I went. I've already told you that I'm a person who listens to mindfulness podcasts on time and a half. I'm always accepting inputs. Always trying to learn something new, especially before the holidays, when the heart and mind are most fertile.

But as the hours passed, I could not bring myself to open any of the books anymore. Instead, on his last day, as shabbat drew to a close, I took my shift, alone by his side, leaning into the wisdom of John Tarrant, a psychotherapist and Zen Buddhist teacher, who writes that: "*Attention is the most basic form of love. Through it we bless and are blessed.*" I just sat there, holding his hand and watching. And I found that there was nothing in the world that mattered more to me than my father's breath. I took note of every different kind of breath: the short, quick, panicked breaths, the deep, agonizing, breathless breaths, the uneven breaths that seemed out of sequence altogether—three quick breaths in a row followed by 18 or 19 seconds—an eternity!—with no breath at all.

In those sacred moments, it was clear: there truly was no greater gift I could give my father, nothing I could do to thank him or repay him for a lifetime of love and kindnesses, for his protection and worry, his plotting and strategizing and endless care... other than simply give him my fullest attention. And that's exactly what I did. For hours.

According to Jewish tradition, when someone is dying, we open a window—a signal to the soul that there's a way out, that we are granting our release when the time comes. In that room, we opened a sliding door, but to honor his privacy, we closed the blinds over the door. At one point in that timeless bedside vigil, that deep presence, a gentle breeze blew into the room and billowed the blinds, and at the very same moment, the small reading light just over his head flickered. And just then, he—who had been completely *non-responsive* for two days—squeezed my hand with all his might.

I knew exactly what was happening. Like Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, the upper realms and the lower realms were competing for Rick Brous. His soul was ready to depart his body—this body that

had served him well for so many years, but in the last few had proven unfit for his giant spirit. His soul was ready to go, but he remained so tethered to this world that he was pulling back, pulling back. Just another day with mom, just another moment with the grandkids. It was a gentle, extended liminality—he was fully and completely between worlds... *ben hashmashot*, just like the sabbath itself: it was no longer day, but not yet night. He was here and he was there, all at once.

The rest of the family came into the room. We recited the *vidui* once again, singing together the words we'll repeat next week on Yom Kippur: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*. Please forgive, we said. I forgive you. Thank you. With love, we release you.

And moments later, as the sky blackened, we sang Havdalah by the bedside: we bless you, God, for distinguishing between light and dark, holy and mundane... between life and death. And then my father—beautiful and brilliant, strong and certain—breathed his last breath and went gently into the night.

I have seen many beautiful things in my life. None of them match what I experienced at my father's burial, when my whole family, after placing earth on his coffin, found we just couldn't step back from the graveside. Instead, we sat down on the grass, singing *Eil Norah Alilah* and crying. At some point I looked up to see hundreds of you... hundreds!... lining up in the 103 degree heat out in Simi Valley to place earth on my father's grave with your own hands. This community showed my family the full force of its love that day, and all throughout *shiva*—you blessed us with your presence and care and I will never forget it.

Some of you were with us on the last night. I shared a story from my first year of rabbinical school, when we spent weeks studying a complex *mahloket*, dispute, in the Talmud, only for it to end, abruptly and unsatisfyingly, with one word: *teiku*.

Teiku means that the question remains unanswered. There's no clear conclusion because the dispute, as some say, is *not only unresolved, but perhaps unresolvable*. My *hevruta*, a second career rabbinical student (he called himself "a recovering attorney"), was enraged. He slammed the book on the table in frustration!

I knew this would infuriate my father too... pragmatist that he was. I remember calling him to share, chiding him a bit that I had chosen a path that would lead me on a lifelong inquiry with no clear resolution, ever. And it did drive him nuts. But it delighted me. I loved and I love the idea of a conversation that is not yet over. That will never end.

Some of you have told me that you speak with your deceased parents or spouse or children every day. Some still fight with your loved ones who have died, some ask for advice, some share deepest secrets, maybe even more so now that they are beyond this world.

My father did not believe in any of that. He thought it was magical thinking. Just because it might make us feel better does not make it true.

But as I sit in my father's chair, elbows resting on the armrest just so... I can tell you that it's my truth.

This story is not nearly over. It's just now taking a different form. And I—grateful for the grace afforded to us in being able to usher him to a compassionate end—will live the rest of my life knowing that there really is no end, just new ways to find him, forever.