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Temple Beth Elohim



Talking Through Loss

“A man seeks employment on a farm. He hands his letter of recommendation to his new employer. It reads simply, ‘He sleeps in a storm.’

“The owner is desperate for help, so he hires the man.

“Several weeks pass, and suddenly, in the middle of the night, a powerful storm rips through the valley.

“Awakened by the swirling rain and howling wind, the owner leaps out of bed. He calls for his new hired hand, but the man is sleeping soundly.

“So he dashes off to the barn. He sees, to his amazement, that the animals are secure with plenty of feed.

“He runs out to the field. He sees the bales of wheat have been bound and are wrapped in tarps.

“He races to the silo. The doors are latched, and the grain is dry.

“And then he understands. ‘He sleeps in a storm.’”¹

On Yom Kippur, our liturgy is characterized by language about life and death. We pray for forgiveness, for our lives to be sustained by God, while also recognizing that in the end we all return to our Creator. This season is a time for taking stock of how we live, for developing awareness of how we might wish to improve or change our ways. On Yom Kippur we often wonder if we have done enough. Have we secured our animals and wrapped our bales of wheat? That is, are our lives in order and our relationships in line with where we wish them to be?

When we live mindful and intentional lives, when we care for the things that are important to us, when all is right with those we love, we will not be troubled by thoughts of a life unfulfilled and we can sleep in a storm.

¹ Albom, Mitch. *Have a Little Faith*. P. 93.

This morning, we stood before God and asked, “who shall live and who shall die?” The whole day is in many ways a reminder of our own mortality. It is impossible to observe Yom Kippur without developing a new awareness of the fact that our lives are bound by time. In fact, Yom Kippur is also considered by our Sages to be an annual dress rehearsal for death. We observe the rules of Yom Kippur by abstaining from food, drink, and other pleasures and necessities. We do this in order to remove distractions and have a spiritual experience without concerning ourselves with physical needs. Some may choose to wear white, the color worn by God’s legion of angels, and as a reminder that at the time of death, we are traditionally buried in a kittle, or white shrouds. In the words of Rabbi Shefa Gold, “For the whole day of Yom Kippur, we act as if it is our last day, our only day to face the Truth, forgive ourselves and each other, remember who we are and why we were born.”²

Soon, the sun will begin to set and the gates of repentance will slowly begin to close. We may feel eager at this point in the day to move on from death to life. Yet, before we can be fully present for the ending of Yom Kippur, we take time for the Yizkor service, a powerful and important part of transitioning into the new year ahead that asks us to recognize the people in our lives who have died, and reminds us to evaluate how we are living in light of our own mortality.

Talking about death and dying is not easy; it can bring up fears for the future and painful memories from the past. It is a topic frequently avoided in society today. We often discuss death in hushed voices and far away from children who might be considered too young to understand. In fact, many of us are taught from a young age to think that death is scary, and so we are afraid to talk about it even as adults. However, death is a reality of life and a universal experience for all of us. How can we become comfortable talking about dying more regularly so that our conversations on loss do not take place solely on Yom Kippur or in the wake of a death?

Even though talking about loss is challenging, it can be viewed as an opportunity to elicit a more positive end of life experience when that time arrives. Having difficult conversations about death earlier in life can free us to focus more of our attention on the holiness of dying and the lived lives of the deceased. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel understood the importance of this idea saying, “In the presence of death there is only silence, and a sense of awe.”³ When we have to make detailed arrangements about end of life choices in our last moments, this sense of awe may not be present. Erica Brown, in her book *Happier Endings*, suggests that this is a reason for making last memories full of the sacred, having ideally, already dealt with the details. Returning to my earlier metaphor, if we have prepared our farms for the inevitable storm, we can be truly present for our loved ones in their last moments and move through loss with more awe.

The Torah, our tree of life, includes an example of the power of having a conversation about one’s after-life wishes prior to the time of death. At the end of the book of Genesis, our beloved

² <http://www.rabbishefagold.com/RehearsingDeath.html>

³ Brown, Erica. *Happier Endings*. P. 294

patriarch Jacob is dying. He calls his family together to give blessings for each of his sons.⁴ He then goes on to share an extensive dialogue in which he communicates his last wishes. “I am about to be gathered to my kin,” he says. “Bury me with my fathers, in the cave which is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave which is in the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre, in the land of Cannan, the field that Abraham bought...”⁵ Jacob faces the reality of death head-on by initiating this conversation, creating a useful model for how future generations can candidly talk about loss.

In an effort to create these meaningful conversations among members of our congregation, we are launching, The Conversation Project here at TBE this fall. The mission of The Conversation Project is to be a “national public engagement campaign to ensure that each person’s wishes for end-of-life care are both expressed and respected. The project has its roots in the growing understanding that too many people are dying in ways they would not choose and that too many loved ones are left feeling guilty and uncertain about whether they did the right thing.”⁶ As an initiative of the Caring Community Team, we hope to open these conversations in our TBE community. Beginning in at the end of October and early November, we will offer workshops that will introduce this project and provide skills to make it a reality in our own families. According to The Conversation Project, “The ultimate goal...is... to change the cultural norm from not having these conversations to having them.” They believe that “to change that norm, we need to impress people with the importance of the conversation, provide them with tools to make it easier to have the conversation, and encourage these critical talks to take place at the kitchen table before there is a crisis.”⁷

It is my hope that we can all understand the importance of planning for death—even when it seems far off—and begin to have these difficult conversations with our loved ones ahead of time by making the topic of dying less taboo. Yet, sometimes we feel like we had no time to prepare, a death happened to quickly, to soon, or against our wishes. However, even in these cases we can still prepare ourselves by having these conversations with our families, and by doing so, we can open up the possibility for *happier endings*.

Studies performed by The Conversation Project, suggest that when people have these conversations about death during life, they experience less guilt and depression after the loss of a loved one. In being honest and realistic in talking about the end, we can be more alive in the present, more aware of the fragility of life, and more appreciative of the people and things that make us happy. The ability to recognize the reality of death can ultimately bring us more happiness and fulfillment in life.

Two weeks ago, Mike Winston, a high school friend of mine, died of ALS also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Mike fought a long battle with ALS, but eventually its slow and crippling effects took his life. In the last few years as his condition deteriorated, I watched my friends in the Minneapolis Jewish community and around the country come together to support him in his courageous battle, and I was reminded that the process of preparing for death has much to

⁴ Genesis 49:1

⁵ Genesis 49:29-30

⁶ The Conversation Project - <http://theconversationproject.org>

⁷ Ibid.

teach about strength and courage. For many, Mike was a teacher of these things. The unending perseverance he displayed even as his body was failing him little by little was a sign of hope to others. Whether attending ongoing physical therapy to adapt to the gradual loss of muscle movement, organizing ambitious fundraising efforts for ALS, or using his eyes to navigate and control his computer to communicate with friends via email and Facebook, Mike fought each and every day. His sense of purpose even in the face of death inspired others to appreciate their own mortality and live life fully as a reflection of his example.

The other day I spoke with a friend back home and we were reminiscing about Mike. He told me that each time he received an email update on Mike's condition, he was struck by all the simple things that he takes for granted that Mike could no longer do, like picking up a glass of water, getting dressed in the morning, or walking up the stairs. He shared with me what it was like to visit Mike after he was completely paralyzed. He found himself helping to carry him up the stairs, and for the first time fully realized the impact of Mike's condition. Overwhelmed, he almost dropped him. Mike, who was attuned to his friend's experience and jokingly said, "don't feel sorry for me, or I'll punch you in the face!" Mike was determined not to let his disease get him down; he kept his sense of humor and he expected those close to him to do the same. He truly allowed his friends to find new meaning in living. The reality of his and every death is that it can show us how fortunate we are to be alive.

Soon we will recite the words of Yizkor which serve as a reminder of many things. First and foremost, the deaths we have experienced in our personal and communal lives. It compels us to consider the limits of the human condition, and it encourages us to live our lives with more gratitude, compassion, and joy. Yizkor gives us the opportunity to acknowledge the reality of death, to talk about and share the experience of death communally, reminding us that candid conversation can be a powerful and comforting experience. As we recite the memorial prayers in the Yizkor service today, let our words of memory remind us of the fragility of life and the charge we have to take advantage of the possibilities in our current realities. In remembering people we have lost, let us recognize how they brought joy and contentment to our lives.

As we move into prayer, I offer a blessing for this sacred moment of remembrance:

May the one who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless this holy community as we come before You, God, to recite Yizkor. Guide us to honor the memories of our loved ones who have died, and to appreciate the ways in which we have grown and changed since their passing. Grant us courage and strength to overcome pain. Compassionate one, we turn to You in times of sorrow, saying "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for You are with me." Grace us with your continuous presence, that we may find joy in realizing the sanctity of human life, and live always with the memory of those who are no longer with us today. Blessed are You Adonai, our God, who bestows on us compassion, grace, and love, giving us the ability to have meaningful conversations, and to not only be prepared for a storm, but also to feel the warmth of the sun after it passes.

Zichronam Livracha – May the memories of those we have lost be for a blessing, now and always.