

“Let’s Have a Conversation...”
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I want to tell you a story about a famous rabbi, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi. Rabbi Yehudah lived in the Land of Israel at the end of the second century. He was an influential Jewish leader. He was selected to be the Nasi, the Patriarch, with apparently many administrative, legislative and judicial responsibilities. He edited the Mishnah, a comprehensive Jewish legal code. He was also beloved and looked up to by his fellow rabbis and scholars.

This is the story about the day he died.

The Talmud tells it this way:¹ Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi was very, very ill. It was clear to him and to those around him that he was dying.

He called for his sons, and when they arrived, he gave them instructions. Take care, he said, that you show respect to your mother. Keep the home fires burning. Let my two attendants, Yosef of Haifa and Shim’on

of Efrat, who attended on me during my lifetime, attend to me after my death.

He called on the Sages of Israel to come forward and he ordered them: Don't mourn for me in the small villages. I don't want to put people out. You may mourn for me in the towns, but for no longer than thirty days.

His disciples gathered in the courtyard just outside his home to pray for his recovery.

Now, Rabbi Yehuda had a dear, devoted aide, a woman of great sensitivity and compassion. She went out onto the roof of Rabbi Yehuda's home. (In the land of Israel, this was—and is—not uncommon: roofs were flat and people would often go out onto them to catch a cool breeze.)

She looked down and she saw the disciples, praying that Rabbi Yehuda remain among them in the land of the living. She looked up and she saw the angels in heaven, beckoning Rabbi Yehuda to join them. She joined

her prayers with those of the disciples, praying that they would defeat the angels above and that Rabbi Yehuda would recover.

But then, the Talmud tells us, Rabbi Yehuda's handmaid looked closely at Rabbi Yehuda and noticed how much pain and suffering he was enduring. He was suffering from some sort of intestinal ailment—today, we might call it colitis—and frequently, he had to get up and go to the bathroom. Now in those days, it was customary to wear *tefillin*—boxes that contain texts from the Torah that one attaches to the arm and head with leather straps—all day long. But you would never bring them into a bathroom. And so whenever Rabbi Yehuda needed to go, he would get up, unwind the tefillin straps laboriously, and go to the bathroom; then, he would come back, put the tefillin back on and get back into bed, exhausted. Within an hour, he would be doing the same thing all over again.

Rabbi Yehuda's handmaid saw all this, and was torn. On the one hand, she continued to identify with Rabbi Yehuda's students. Like them, she wanted Rabbi Yehuda to remain among the living. On the other hand, she saw how much he was suffering, and she observed the angels above

beckoning to him. She saw that Rabbi Yehuda was hovering between this world and the next, between the terrestrial angels below (his students) and the celestial angels above. They were evenly matched.

What, she thought to herself, does Rabbi Yehuda want?

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My guess is that that is not an unfamiliar image to many of us. So many of us have been there, haven't we, in the presence of a relative or a friend who is gravely ill, and close to death.

In some cases, medical treatment needs time to do its magic. In other cases, time makes clear just where things are heading. What is often the case, unfortunately, is that patients are incapacitated, and their family members really don't have a clue how they would like to be cared for, how they'd like to live out their remaining days. What's more, often patients and members of their families haven't internalized a simple biological and religious truth, namely, that we are all mortal.

I'm sure I'm not the only one in this room who spent time this summer reading Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*.² Being mortal, he writes, is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology. (p. 259) Dr. Gawande shares with us, in his clear, beautiful prose, just what is at stake in thinking and talking about these issues. He tells us how crucial it is to think ahead of time about what's important to us, and how we'd like to live our lives, as our capacity diminishes. How can we keep our lives worth living when we're weak and frail and can't fend for ourselves anymore? And who will decide, and how, when to shift from pushing against limits, to making the best of a situation? (See Gawande, p. 262.)

Jewish tradition has a lot to teach us in this regard.

Probably the best-known Jewish teaching in this area is that life is of infinite value, and preserving life is a *mitzvah*, so important that it takes precedence over almost all other *mitzvot*. It's not surprising that Jews have pursued the medical arts with such energy and commitment.

There may be other reasons, but surely a primary one is that our tradition has long highly valued healing. We "must not stand idly by the

blood of a neighbor.” So says Leviticus. If there’s something we can do, we must. Restoring a person’s health is like restoring anything else that a person has lost. It’s a mitzvah.

But there are other considerations and concerns. Sometimes, life-saving efforts can bring with them terrible pain and suffering. What then? In our tradition, *pain* is not a value; *alleviating* pain is. When a patient is suffering, it is the duty of those tending to him or her—doctors, nurses, family members—to do what they can to reduce that suffering. Now, might that conflict with the goal of preserving and maintaining life? Possibly. What then?

Clearly, treatment options raise all sorts of moral and religious issues. The last thing I want to do this morning is to suggest that there is a simple *psak din*, or Jewish legal ruling that answers all our questions in each and every circumstance. That’s not the case. Every situation needs to be examined carefully against the background of Jewish values and tradition. It’s important to study what the Jewish tradition has to say about these matters, and to get some rabbinic guidance.³

It's also important for us to think about and to talk about these matters with our loved ones ahead of time; to try to clarify what we and they most value about life, so that family members can act in the best interests of a patient even when they are not able to communicate with others.

Many of us may recall reading the columns of Ellen Goodman, a Boston-based writer who wrote for the *Boston Globe* for many years. A few years ago, Ellen Goodman got involved in an initiative called, The Conversation Project. It's an effort to help people figure out how to have these conversations. You can find it on-line at theconversationproject.org. I encourage everyone to go there, read what is written there, and then to set aside time to have those conversations that will help us and our loved ones live out our lives the way we (and they) would like to, even as our lives are drawing to a close.

By the way, if you're wondering whether it's really necessary to be talking about this, consider the following statistics that are available at the Conversation Project website:

When asked whether talking with loved ones about end of life care is important, 90% say that it is. Yet only 27% report having actually done it.

When asked whether it is important to make your wishes known to your loved ones, 82% say, YES; but only 23% have actually done it.

So there are conversations to be had.

Why aren't these conversations occurring? There's no better answer than to point to the title of Roz Chast's recently published memoir about helping her parents through the last few years of their lives: *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*⁴ Who wants to talk about this? Most people don't look forward to having a discussion about how they want to live when their capacities are diminished: it just seems too depressing. We avoid it like the plague. As Woody Allen once put it: "I'm not afraid of dying; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Why are we talking about this today, of all days? Because this is the day when we think about what it means to be mortal. On this day, we

simulate that passage from life to death that we usually try to avoid thinking about. We dress in white, refrain from eating; we confess our sins, and pray for forgiveness. What does the mahzor say? In that stark, eloquent, and frightening passage from the Unetaneh Tokef, that we will shortly be reciting, the poet gives us the message that Atul Gawande is trying to convey:

אָדָם יְסוּדוֹ מֵעֶפֶר	וְסוּפוֹ לְעֶפֶר
בְּנִפְשׁוֹ יָבִיא לְחֵמוֹ	מִשׁוּל כְּחֶרֶס הַנֶּשֶׁבֶר
כְּחֻצִיר יָבֵשׁ וְכֻצִּיץ נוֹבֵל	כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר וְכַעֲנַן כָּלָה
וְכַרוּחַ נוֹשֶׁבֶת	וְכַאֲבָק פּוֹרֵחַ
וְכַחֲלוֹם יְעוֹף	

We come from dust,	And we are heading toward dust;
By our souls we bring home bread.	We are like a broken shard;
Dried up grass, a faded flower;	Like a fleeting shadow or a passing cloud;
Like a breath of wind,	Like whirling dust,
Like a dream that slips away.	

In short, we are mortal.

And there are implications of that. Yes, medical care can keep us alive and well—sometimes for a long, long time. But eventually, it is powerless. Entirely powerless. And that implies that we should be having conversations with those whom we love about what matters to us, and how we want to live out our days.

Recognizing that we are mortal has other implications as well. If the goal of medical care is to add years to our life, then the goal of being here, of davening, of learning what our tradition is all about—what it demands of us, and how to live full and fulfilling Jewish lives—is, in Rabbi Sidney Greenberg’s felicitous phrase, to add life to our years.⁵

So much of the urgency of this day derives from the realization that our lives are finite and short. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, “We have only one life to live, and however long it is, it is a mere microsecond in the history of the universe.”⁶ Let’s use that precious and fleeting gift well, to be good and to do good.

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Let me go back to that scene from 1,800 years ago. There's Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, in bed, painfully putting his tefillin on and off. There are the celestial angels above beckoning him to join them, and the "terrestrial angels" below, the disciples in the courtyard, pulling him toward them. And there is Rabbi Yehuda's handmaid, on the roof. She looks up at the heavens, and she looks down at the disciples in the courtyard. And she looks at Rabbi Yehuda, in acute distress. This time, she prays that the celestials will overcome the terrestrials.

And then, the Talmud tells us, Rabbi Yehuda's maid picks up a vase, a large earthenware vase, and tosses it off the roof. It falls into the courtyard and comes crashing to the ground. The disciples are startled. In shock, they cease their praying for a moment to look at the scene. At that very moment, the text tells us, Rabbi Yehuda's soul gently leaves his body.

What did Rabbi Yehuda's handmaid do? In the words of the rabbis, she did not hasten his death. Rather, she removed an impediment delaying

the departure of his soul from his body.⁷ Why did she do this?

Because—and this is conveyed by the language of the text—she knew Rabbi Yehudah haNasi and his needs. And this handmaid goes down in Jewish history as a great friend and supporter of the rabbi.

One more thing. The language that the Talmud uses to describe Rabbi Yehuda's death is instructive. The text doesn't say, "he died." Instead, it says, "*v'nach naphshei d'rabbi*," "and Rabbi Yehuda's soul rested." That image of the soul being at rest is a very powerful one in our tradition.

It's an image picked up most recently by Oliver Sacks in his final essay, in which he said,

And now, weak, short of breath, ... I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest.⁸

Zochreinu l'chayim! That's what we say on this day, right? "*Remember us to life!*" What does it mean? We *generally* understand it to mean that we want God to remember to write us down in the proper book so that

we'll live another year. But maybe, *sometimes*, it means something different. Maybe it can mean that we want those around us to remember how we'd like to live, to remember what is most important to us, during the many days, weeks, months, and hopefully years that we have before us. For we want as many of our days as possible to be as full of life as possible.

In order for that to happen, we have to talk about something that may not seem very pleasant but which indeed can help maintain and sustain that *zikaron*, that memory, when we most need it.

Gmar hatimah Tovah! May you and your loved ones be privileged to live lives of health and happiness, meaning and purpose, in the coming year and beyond.

¹ TB Ketubot 103-104.

² Give publication information here.

³ A good place to start is Elliot Dorff's classic volume, *Matters of Life and Death: A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics* (Jewish Publication Society: 1998).

⁴ Give publication information here.

⁵ See *Adding Life to Our Years*, by Sidney Greenberg, Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1959, pp. 1-8.

⁶ The Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor, translation and commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, p. 851.

⁷ This distinction is presented in the gloss of Rabbi Moses Isserles in the Shulchan Arukh (Yoreh Deah 339:1, gloss): "It is forbidden to do anything to hasten the death of one who is in a dying condition. ... If, however, there is something that causes a

delay in the exit of the soul, as, for example, if near to this house there is a sound of pounding as one who is chopping wood, or there is salt on his tongue, and these delay the soul's leaving the body, it is permitted to remove these because there is no direct act involved here, only the removal of an obstacle." (Translation: Dorff, p. 199)

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html?_r=0 .