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Temple Beth Or, Raleigh, NC

Preparing for Death & Dying

Lately, I have been listening to a lot of podcasts. One of them, hosted by Anna Sale, is entitled "Death, Sex, & Money." She asserts that, as a society, we avoid talking about these three topics even though we actually *want* and *need* to talk about them. I am sorry to disappoint you--or maybe not?--but I will not be talking about sex or money this morning. Yom Kippur, however, is an opportune time to ponder death.

On this day, we confront our own mortality. We wear white to resemble the shrouds in which all Jews are buried; we deprive our body of food and water--sustenance required only for the living. We pray the words of Unetaneh Tokef, admitting aloud that we do not -that we **can**not - know who will live and who will die; by fire or by water, by famine or by thirst... On this day, we come face to face with death.

I recognize that most our lives have already included encounters with death and dying. Some of you have recently experienced the death of a loved one and others of you have a loved one who is critically or terminally ill. Some

of you bear fresh wounds of mourning in your hearts and others feel the kinship of sorrow[1]. I want to recognize your pain, honor your sorrow, and help in your healing.

As a rabbi, I am privileged to walk with people in their journeys through death and mourning. Encountering death is a sacred challenge. And yet, over and over again I have found comfort in the many rituals and traditions Judaism offers to navigate the process of death, dying, and mourning. A one point, not too long ago, I officiated three funerals in five days. Within that short span, I experienced three different approaches to encountering and preparing for death.

In one case, the person who died had been in a steady decline. While his family knew generally what he wanted, specific medical questions about end of life care remained. We spent much of our time together imagining what he would have wanted for himself.

In another case, the person had died rather suddenly, and his family needed to scramble: pick out a cemetery plot, decide about Jewish rituals surrounding preparation of the body, talk through the details of a funeral service. We spent much of our time together solidifying logistics.

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[1] Adapted from the CCAR Rabbi's Manual

In the third family, the person had lived a long and full life and had made his wishes known: casket had been chosen, cemetery plot purchased, instructions about preparing the body for burial articulated to family members. We spent much of our time together reflecting on the life of this family's loved one and the legacy he had left through his children and grandchildren.

While every person and every family has their own unique relationships and dynamics, as humans, we share some similarities. On Rosh Hashanah, I identified two complementary and yet inseparable parts of our bodies that we need to care for in order to build up our little red health bar: the *guf*, our physical body, and the *nefesh*, our soul. Today, I want to revisit these aspects of our whole beings as we consider death: how do we prepare to care for our *guf* and our *nefesh* at the end of our life? I will also add a third aspect we confront when considering the end of our lives: our search for meaning.

While working as a hospital chaplain during Rabbinical School, I was called in the middle of the night to the room of a patient up on the fourteenth floor. The patient, a Japanese man in his early 70s, was preparing for transport to a different hospital to undergo risky surgery. His son stood by his side,

trying to understand what his father wanted medically. A distinct language barrier existed between the patient and the medical staff, and the son was forced to take on the role of translator. Because of the impending surgery, the patient realized he needed to create instructions about how to proceed during and after the surgery: what if the worst happened? Who would make decisions for him? He needed answers, and he needed them immediately. But in the moment, both father and son were overwhelmed with emotion; they wanted to be focused on each other. Instead, they had to focus on figuring out the details of the medical treatment.

Advanced directives make it possible for us to focus on each other in the difficult moments. By specifying in a legal document the medical treatment we do or do not want, and by naming a health care proxy, we help our loved ones make decisions if we are unable to make them ourselves. Entering this conversation can be scary. It means accepting death as a potential outcome. But we have tools to help guide us. In July, CBS Morning News ran a segment called "Forward Thinking" that identified advanced directives as an important tool to utilize when looking towards an unknown future.

One way to create advanced directives is through Five Wishes, an example of a living will. Five Wishes "helps start and structure important

conversations about care in times of serious illness: The person I want to make care decisions for me when I can't, The kind of medical treatment I want or don't want...[2]" The first of these five wishes focus on *guf*, the body. What lengths do we want to go to to keep our body functioning? Another guide for this conversation can be found through The Conversation Project, an organization that publishes "starter kits" to help initiate these difficult discussions.

In making healthcare decisions about end of life care, Judaism has much to offer. Our tradition teaches that *pikuach nefesh*, the value of saving a life, comes before all else. We can--in fact we *must*--violate other Jewish laws if doing so can save a life. However, the teachings of our tradition also explain that postponing death is not the same thing as saving a life, emphasizing quality of life in addition to quantity. Declining an experimental treatment, for example, does not violate the value of *pikuach nefesh*. Furthermore, "once it becomes clear that our technologies no longer serve what we would define as a reasonably therapeutic purpose, we are permitted to withdraw those

[2] https://www.agingwithdignity.org/

treatments, even if in doing so we allow the patient to die sooner than he or she otherwise would have died.[3]"

Rooting our medical decisions about end of life care in Judaism helps us care for our *guf*, our body.

Today, my charge to you is to have this conversation with loved ones. Difficult though it may be, it will ultimately create easier conversations down the road. Visit the Five Wishes website or download your starter kit from The Conversation Project. Make an appointment to see Rabbi Dinner or me, and ask yourself: To what lengths do I want to go to to keep my body functioning?

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In Cincinnati, I spent time with music genius Bonia Shur. During my second year of Rabbinical School, I sang in a tribute concert where we honored him and his music. Here at TBO, we regularly sing a number of his pieces, including the Kedusha (sing a phrase), Sim Shalom, and May the Memory. Some of you were lucky enough to spend time with Bonia when he came to Raleigh as an artist-in-residence many years ago. He truly was a gifted soul and I will certainly never forget his dynamic eyebrows.

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3 https://reformjudaism.org/practice/ask-rabbi/what-reform-judaisms-position-allowing-terminally-ill-person-who-mentally
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Bonia died during my third year of school. As a member of the committee responsible for ritual observations on campus, I led the effort to find *shomrim* for him. Shomrim, or "protectors," sit with the body after it has been washed and purified. They assure that the body and soul are protected until the funeral.

My shift to sit shomeret was from 11pm-2am. I arrived at Weil Funeral Home, punched the code in the keypad of the door, and made my way to the shomrim room. I had learned and performed Bonia's Hallel earlier that year, and began by singing the Hallel psalms to his melody. I started out fearful and uncomfortable. But the process of reciting psalms was calming. I do not believe that I literally kept evil spirits away, but I do believe I helped Bonia's *nefesh*, his soul, find peace.

Before I went to rabbinical school, I had no idea rituals like these existed. But over the past few years, I have found them to be deeply meaningful. In moments of uncertainty, doubt, and questioning, Judaism offers ritual, routine, and concrete steps to take. Our customs surrounding death and dying connect us to others and remind us that we are not alone. They provide ways in which we--and others-- can care for our *nefesh*, our soul, all the way until the very end.

In addition to the rituals performed after someone's death, we have rituals to help us prepare for death. We offer a final confession at the bedside of a dying person, spoken either by the person or on his behalf. Today, on Yom Kippur, we offer similar confessions. At the bedside of a dying person, we recite Sh'ma, affirming God's oneness in the liminal moment before death. Today, on Yom Kippur, is the only time all year that we offer both lines of the Sh'ma in full voice. All of these rituals help connect us; to each other, to our loved one who is dying, to the memories we shared with that person, to God. These rituals are often performed by people other than the rabbi.

Our community *chevre kedisha*, literally "sacred community", responds every time there is a Jewish death. They prepare the deceased for burial, offering psalms and blessings while engaging in the sacred act of washing and purifying the body. If you are a member of the Raleigh *chevre kedisha*, thank you. The work you do is sacred and it can be difficult. But without you, we could not fulfill the mitzvah of burying our dead. If anyone here today is interested in joining the this sacred community of volunteers, or even finding out more information about what they do, please be in touch with me.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "In the presence of death there is only silence, and a sense of awe." Heschel's description may not ring true for

us all, but his words offer a suggestion for what death can be. When we prepare, we allow ourselves to spend a final moment with our loved ones sharing a sense of quiet and awe, rather than urgent decision making and confusion. [4]

Contemplating the physical and spiritual needs that surround death and dying leads us to an evaluation of our life. Part of preparing for and coming to terms with our death enables us to continue to **choose** life. As we read from Torah this morning in parashat *Nitzavim*, we are given a choice between good and evil, life and death. We get to choose life. We get to make meaning. We get to dedicate ourselves to a purpose that is greater than ourselves. And yet, this can feel intangible and challenging.

One tangible way to make meaning is by creating an ethical will. Most of us understand--and hopefully have--a will; a legal document that details what happens to our assets and possessions after we die. In Jewish tradition, we also have a long history of ethical wills, in which people identify the values and the ethics by which they lived and articulate their hopes of what others might learn from their experiences.

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[4] http://theconversationproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Adler-YK-Sermon-5777-The-Conversation-EA.pdf

Our Bible presents the first example of this; Jacob gathers his children around his bedside to tell them how to live once he dies. In a way, the entire book of Deuteronomy serves as Moses's ethical will; it is his proclamation to the Jewish people about how to live in the land that he, himself, will not enter.

Hannah Senesh, a 20th century Hungarian immigrant to pre-Israel Palestine, wrote a letter to her brother George, in case she did not return from her paratrooper mission to enemy territory. She wrote, "there are events without which one's life becomes unimportant."[5] She continued, "We have need of one thing: people who are brave and without prejudices, who are not robots, who want to think for themselves and not accept outmoded ideas."[6]

William Joseph Adelson, a contemporary father and husband in Sudbury, Massachusetts, was part of a study group that prepared for Yom Kippur by writing ethical wills.

In his letter, addressed to his family, he wrote, "I have tried to set an example for you in active participation in the Jewish and secular communities. I have always felt the importance of sharing these dimensions...It would please me if you found some of the same enthusiasm and excitement in the Jewish

[5]*Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury* edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer
[6] ibid

tradition that I have. It is a dimension of spirit that can bring great meaning and intensity to your lives."[7]

He concluded,

"More than material possessions, I hope I will have left each of you:

An optimistic spirit

A fervor and enthusiasm for life

A sensitivity to nature and esthetics

A closeness and regard for one another

A sense of responsibility and concern for others

And a sense of worthwhileness about yourselves."

Imagine yourself writing this kind of letter. To whom would it be addressed? What would you advise? What beliefs and traditions and knowledge would you want to impart? How successfully have you lived up to your own ideals? Creating an ethical will requires time, effort and energy. It is not easy, but making it a priority allows us to evaluate our lives, especially at this High Holy Day season.

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[7] ibid

"The light of life is a finite flame...life is kindled, it burns, it glows, it is radiant with warmth and beauty."[8] And at some point, it will begin to fade. We may not know when that moment will come, but we can prepare, making our wishes known for the care of our *guf* and our *nefesh*, and by making meaning for the duration of time that the light is kindled. By making meaning, we choose life.

In choosing life, let us discuss end of life medical decisions with our loved ones that prepare us to face our final moments , let us make the effort to explore Jewish ritual and teachings that comfort our soul, and let us make the time to craft ethical wills that help us identify our most important values.

Ken yehi ratzon, may these words be worthy of coming true.

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[8] *Mishkan Tfilah* page 593

- (6/23/17) Uplifting something or other on death/dying/mourning rituals
    - Ppl revert back to strict interpretation of halakha regardless of their attention to it throughout the rest of their lives - educate people about those rituals and the ways in which YK is part of that
    - If people think about things like that ahead of time; discussion about creating wills/ethical wills, advance directives/5 wishes
    - Acknowledging mortality - overarching piece of it - once we acknowledge it, waht do we do?
        - Why do we/how do we get to a place where we accept our mortality?
        - And now that we have, what do we do about it?
        - Mindfulness, being present in the moment - totally different from doing the tachlis components of planning a funeral/mourning/etc
    - And make sure to acknowledge those who have already done this work - remember the range, from small to big steps.
    - Name that it's tough to talk about and to have these conversations

-Yom Kippur rituals are a rehearsal of our death (no food/water, wearing white, no makeup)
-Yom Kippur liturgy is designed to create images of this (Unetaneh Tokef)
How do we make it (YK/life) count? How do we make it (YK/life) mean something?

-family insisting on a shomer/mad at the funeral home/etc etc etc even though they didn't even know that was a thing beforehand

-life review with Betty & Yale

http://theconversationproject.org/faith/

https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/03/02/what-matters-most-you-end-life

Kakaleivitch takeaway:

Using Yom Kippur as a rehearsal of our own death helps us better understand our own mortality and helps us prepare to live and die well.