

# KOL NIDRE 2022

## “GOOD GRIEF: MAKING SENSE OF LOSS, LOVE, AND TIME”

Rabbi Sharon Mars  
Temple Israel Columbus, Ohio

The coroner would never provide a satisfactory explanation for what killed her - was it a strain of SARS that filled my mother's lungs with sudden pneumonia? Was it some other phantom virus that suffocated her as she struggled to put her coat on so my dad could take her to the emergency room that morning in April 2000? Alas, just one day after a week-long visit to North Carolina, Or and our (then) 2 kids and I returned home to Jerusalem. Within two hours of arriving in our apartment, I got a call from my brother. "Shar," his voice choked. "It's Mom. Mom died."

I remember that I gripped the bathroom sink as my very own Twilight Zone cinematic spin-out ensued. I recall the primal urge I had at that moment to somehow unhinge my jaws and crash my gaping mouth into the concrete - cream-colored Israeli tile with black vertical stripes and hand-drawn flowers. How? How could this happen? I'm certain I sent up a cry to raise the dead themselves.

Beloved friends came to our rescue, making PB&J sandwiches for the plane ride back to the States, helping us repack, and making flight arrangements. When we returned that night to Ben Gurion Airport, the same JFK to Tel-Aviv flight crew greeted us, this time with ashen faces matching our own. I remember their sweetness as they tucked us in with a squirmy 2-year-old Adi seated beside Or, and a tiny 2-month-old Toby in my lap.

Somehow, we managed to get home to my folks' house in Los Angeles a mere few hours after receiving the worst news of my life. The funeral was a blurry impasto, complete with sobbing relatives and fussing young children, and a rent-a-rabbi whose delivery was less than convincing (take it from me, rabbis know best when other rabbis are simply "phoning it in").

The following seven days of Shiva, the Jewish mourning period, felt like an invasion, a parade of my parents' friends, accompanied by an unseamly amount of bagels, babka, and brisket. Thank God, one of my cousins decided to add a touch of comedy to the event by bringing a date - yes, a date! - to Mom's Shiva. Prayers were chanted daily and we mumbled Kaddish and listened to words - always more words! - to slake our thirst for her:

- For Annie the young girl who up and moved herself and her sister from New York to Los Angeles at the age of 18, went to UCLA, met and married my dad, and became the beloved family matriarch;
- For Mrs. Meister, the bilingual kindergarten teacher who brought education to first generation immigrant kids from El Salvador and Guatemala;
- For Mom, my mom who could be demanding, and who was always my number one call when anything significant or insignificant happened. She had an impish smile and a fast wit and could send a zinger when the moment called for it. She loved fiercely, sometimes to a fault, as it could wedge its way between people, though she never meant for it to.

I spent much of Shiva curled up speechless on my parents' bed, and my teachers and friends offered words of consolation and encouragement during that first week after the funeral. And then when it was time, as the swirl of Shiva passed, they stood me up so that I could literally "get up from shiva." In traditional Jewish fashion, one so deftly attuned to the human heart, we uttered Kaddish on that last Shiva morning and went outside for the first time in a week, my dad, brother, sister and I holding hands. In our new family constellation, we walked down the street and back into the world, sans Mom and forever changed.

The sadness was utterly crushing. More than anything, I felt robbed of our good-bye. Not that I even believe in fairness when it comes to death. Death is inevitable. But justice feels strikingly absent when it comes to sudden, unexpected loss.

In the period between my mother's death and our travels back to the States after two years in Jerusalem, we moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, followed by another move to Columbus six years later. The gaping wound of my own loss had diminished in size by that time, but not in depth.

I became a hospice chaplain at Wexner Heritage Village. Over the next five years, I bore witness to the exquisitely sacred nature of the intersection of life and death. Of course, I could see the paradox: Here my own mom had died a very sudden death and here I was working full-time in the death and dying industry. Was chaplaincy my attempt to “make right” everything that I deemed so very wrong about my mother’s death? Did I take this job to correct some existential injustice that befell my family? When my mom died out of the blue 22 years ago, no one (not her, not any one of us) got to have a “good death.” Hospice came to represent the opposite of that experience for me. Here are a few pearls of wisdom that I learned from that time:

- 1. What the dying person experiences is real.** Those things seen or unseen by the human eye can be fully experienced by someone who is dying. A dying woman’s hallucination of her *balabusta* grandmother making a gefilte fish right there in her hospice room is thereby authentic without need for authentication. Our job as the caretakers and spectators is to remind the dying person that they are safe and loved.
- 2. People become a more exaggerated version of themselves OR even more who their essence is as they are dying.** No matter what kind of character they may have been - difficult or easy-going, grumpy or sedate, fearful and suspicious or welcoming and trusting - they will almost certainly become even MORE that way as they die.
- 3. Presence means everything.** To cultivate a sacred presence - unhurried and patient, focused and undistracted, available for the uncomfortable as well as the easier conversations; and malleable to whatever changes need to happen - is to show the dying person that they are the center of our universe.
- 4. Forgiveness is key.** It allows all the embers of pain to be extinguished at last, no more howling replay of angry verbal lobs, no more holding the proverbial grudge. Forgiveness can bring into sharp focus the proximity of life and death and help shed the husks of all that is profane and careless and proud. Forgiveness is the veil that can be lifted between two people who wish to share one final kiss of gratitude, respect, and affection.
- 5. Giving permission to die can be the greatest gift of all.** Which may seem like a bridge too far for many of us because it acknowledges the reality of death and requires the dying to reckon with their mortality, even as we wrestle with our own. But done well, it can be the most selfless act of love one can bestow upon another human being.
- 6. Dying can be beautiful when the conditions are just right.** Symptoms of pain or discomfort are controlled and/or absent, and all the important people are there. Death is the great unifier, when all becomes one, forever and ever, and thus resolves the cycle of life. Peace arrives at long last.

In his book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, Oliver Burkeman argues that all we have is time. In his words,

“Just as there will be a final occasion on which I pick up my son, a thought that appalls me, but one that’s hard to deny since I surely won’t be doing it when he’s 30, there will be a last time that you visit your childhood home or swim in the ocean or make love or have a deep conversation with a certain close friend. Yet usually there’ll be no way to know in the moment itself that you’re doing it for the last time. We should therefore try to treat every such experience with the reverence we’d show if it were the final instance of it. And indeed, there’s a sense in which every moment of life is our last time. It arrives. You’ll never get it again. And once it’s passed, your remaining supply of moments will be one smaller than before.”

On average, our lives amount to 4,000 weeks. We more often think of time in terms of quantity rather than quality. Our finitude, though, is the one thing we have in common with all other human beings who have ever lived and it’s non-negotiable.

While it's impossible to master our time, we can still plan. And here, Burkeman comments on the work of the Jungian psychotherapist James Hollis, who suggests that when we have big decisions to make in our lives, we should not ask ourselves: Will this make me happy? Instead, we should ask: Does this path enlarge me or diminish me? Does this path enlarge or diminish others?

Planning ahead - to the extent that we can - is everything. If we're brave enough to start that crucial conversation, doors can open between family members. Financial matters can be tied up, wishes conveyed and plans made as to how the family will continue despite their impending loss.

And here is where the Sharon who experienced personal loss and the Sharon who worked in hospice and the Sharon who happens to be a rabbi cannot resist the temptation to preach. Dear friends, I bless you with the courage to plan. Planning in advance for one's own death has benefits for anyone here who plans on dying someday.

For me, it all comes down to this, something of my very own living and ethical will:

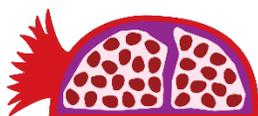
- The Holy One of Mercy and Blessing wants my final days on earth to be filled with humor and love and cinnamon rolls. When death comes to my own doorstep - PLEASE GOD, many years from now! - here's exactly what I want to have happen, just so you know:
- No to Enya; Yes to all classic rock after the year 1966. If I'm in pain, play Nirvana to help me fight through it. If I need to sleep, play Lo-Fi Hip Hop and the Israeli neo-Hasidische band Alma. As I'm going out, keep "Claire de Lune" on a loop.
- If the weather permits, roll me outside and sit me near any form of running water, flowers and trees. Preferably, I'll watch the Pacific crash its waves at my feet one last time.
- Keep lifting up and calling out the issues I care about **that are anchored in Jewish values:** women's reproductive rights, mass incarceration, the opioid epidemic, housing and food insecurity, protection of the earth, and everything that stymies a young kid's chances of starting off right in this world.
- And keep talking - about Israel and Palestine, but more importantly about Israelis and Palestinians, and about being lovingly critical when it comes to Israel instead of overly simplistic, short-sighted, and lacking nuance when it comes to Israel. Nothing but nothing is unsolvable.
- And don't forget how much I loved you. Yes, you. Humanity more generally but also YOU - my family, my community, my friends old and new, my teachers, my people, my tiny and brief life - more than anything. Our timelines somehow magically overlapped. And I got to be myself in front of you, at least on my better days.

The actor Keanu Reeves was once asked what he thinks will happen to us after we die. He replied: "I think the ones who love us will miss us."

Tal Chana, our youngest child of three, was born two years after her namesake Grandma Anne died. Tal is a shining droplet of my mom - same impish smile and zingers slung with perfect timing. She is a glimmer of the love that remains, my mom's radiance in 20-year-old form, again. And even though she never met her Grandma, she says she still misses her. "The ones who love us will miss us."

Death is not about what comes next. It's about the people we love and about the tools we give them and the honor we show them before we die. When I die, I will drift into the universe in my resting form and I will be full of peace. But only if I spend some of my time now doing the legwork. That, to me, is a death that would be good.

I want to wish you all a *G'mar Chatimah Tovah* and *Shanah Tovah!*



Temple Israel Columbus