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I re-learned an important truth this past year. On Sunday afternoon, June 16, Beverly and I had the supreme joy of standing under the Huppa here at B'nai Israel, as our daughter, Shira, married Graeme Cohen. But as jubilant as we genuinely were, as heart-warming as the presence of family and friends from many different corners of the world proved to be - there was also a poignant awareness of those who were not with us on that most special day. I know that Beverly and I were thinking of our own parents and how much they would have cherished that moment - . . . Bev's Dad - our last parent - having died just a few months before the wedding. I know that our son-in-law was surely thinking of his own father, who had died much too soon.

Our experience at Shira's and Graeme's wedding surely mirrors what most of us encounter. We sit at a Synagogue service and there is a missing face or an empty seat next to us. That same phenomenon may occur at our Seder table - or at a life-cycle event - or just in the normal ebb and flow of our everyday routine. We gulp a little bit - or feel a tear in the corner of our eye, as we recognize once again that "bittersweet" is indeed the inevitable hallmark of life. As much as our culture tends to deny and suppress death, no one is shielded from its impact. And yes, even when we have every reason to rejoice - as Beverly and I certainly did on June 16 at Shira's and Graeme's wedding, the shadows of loss are there - perhaps on the sidelines - but nevertheless there in different ways for each of us - because that is the unavoidable conundrum of life.

So clearly, the challenge which is ours -- whatever our age - whatever our circumstances – is to gain insight, self-awareness and wisdom, so that while staring at death, we can maximize the potential of each day which is ours.

Recently, the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington published an extraordinary booklet entitled "Lessons of 100 Lifetimes." Students from our community interviewed seniors living on our neighboring campus - carefully transcribed their responses - and created in essence, ethical wills - reflecting the values and perceptions that the seniors wanted to share with a younger generation - and in a sense - with all of us. A few of their comments:

Age 94:

"Your brains are not your own; they are a gift from God. Your heart is yours."

Age 88:

"I have learned the significance of human kindness. Without helping one another, we devalue existence."

Age 82:

"I've always read biographies and science books. I have learned that life is not a straight line, even for the most successful. There are bumps and curves you are not expecting. You need to learn to deal with adverse circumstances."

Age 77:

"I realized that you do not need money for a good upbringing. My parents gave me a good sense of security and really stressed the importance of education, even though we did not have a lot of money."

Age 86:

". . . Being Jewish is not just wearing a kippa and Tallit. It is taking action."

And finally:

Age 95:

"Life is a process - and one is always building towards different goals. I still feel that the best part of my life is beginning now."

Wow!

Dr. Ira Byock is a nationally-recognized authority in palliative and end-of-life care and an advocate on behalf of those who are seriously-ill, as well as their families.

In a book called: The Four Things that Matter Most, Dr. Byock focuses on four phrases that should be verbalized in all human relationships.

What are those phrases?

"Please forgive me -

I forgive you -

Thank you -

I love you."

Dr. Byock writes: "I have taught hundreds of patients who were facing life's end, when suffering can be profound to say (these) Four Things. But the Four Things apply at any time. Comprising just eleven words, these four short sentences carry the core wisdom of what people who are dying have taught me about what matters most in life." . . . Dr. Byock continues: "You need not wait until you or someone you love is seriously ill. By taking the time and by caring enough to express forgiveness, gratitude and affection, you can renew and revitalize your most precious connections . . .

We are, each one of us, at every moment, a heartbeat away from death. Seen (then) against the backdrop of our certain mortality, our differences are dwarfed by our commonality - and the importance we hold for one another."

Once again - the four phrases:

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

Perhaps you recall reading a touching op-ed piece in the Post by Senator Mark Kirk, in which he describes how on January 3, 2013, exactly a year after a major debilitating stroke, he slowly, and laboriously climbed the Capitol steps once again and returned to the Senate.

For months, Senator Kirk had wanted to give up on his extremely tough rehabilitative routine. He had always been - as he put it - a "glass half-empty kind of guy . . . a believer in Murphy's law."

But Senator Mark Kirk persevered. He had a goal: to climb those Capitol steps and walk the 50 paces to the Senate floor.

He comments: "I'm different from what I was. My left leg and left arm might never work like they once did - but my mind is sharp. I'm capable of doing the work entrusted to me by the people of Illinois, but I am forever changed . . .

I'm an optimist now - grateful for every blessing. Bad things happen, but life is still waiting for you to make the most of it. I want my life to count more than the honors I once craved (and) . . . I believe it will . . .

My faith is stronger. My humility is deeper. I know I depend on family and friends more than I ever realized. . . .

Climbing the steps of the Capitol on January 3 was one of the greatest moments of my life. It was a goal fulfilled and a message to all stroke survivors. Never, ever give up."

And Senator Mark Kirk concludes.

"I was once a pessimist. I'm not that man anymore. And that change - brought about by misfortune - is the best thing that ever happened to me."

At Shira's and Graeme's wedding, as I remembered loved ones, missed them and reflected on their influences, I rediscovered for myself what I had known all along – but had perhaps pushed aside in the frenetic pace which is most of ours: Life is ever-so

brief, ever-so fragile, ever-so-precious . . . but how we use it can become an enduring legacy which transcends even death.