

I Wish...

Rabbi Keren Gorban
Temple Sinai
Yom Kippur Yizkor 5779

I wish.

I wish I had gotten there sooner that morning.
I wish I had been more comfortable talking to her.
I wish I had been more comfortable just sitting with her.

I wish I had visited more often.
I wish I had been more willing to talk when she was on the phone.
I wish I had listened to her stories and learned her recipes while there was still time.

I wish.

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride,” so the saying goes. But I don’t want horses. I want time.

My Israeli grandparents—my dad’s parents—and I were not close when I was a child. Not only were we separated by an ocean and a continent, but we were also separated by significant language and cultural differences. By the time I was in second or third grade, my Hebrew comprehension was barely passable and I couldn’t form complete sentences. My primary contact with them was by phone. When they made their weekly phone calls, I usually tried to hide. That way I wouldn’t have to sit awkwardly on the phone while they said things I didn’t really understand and waited for me to respond.

I saw my grandparents, at most, once a year. We usually alternated trips—one year we would go to Israel and the next they would come to the States. I liked being in Israel and the idea of seeing my extended family. We took lots of hikes and day trips and my brother and I spent hours on the playground or in the garden. Sometimes my cousins would come over or we would go to their house and play games. But around my grandparents, I would do my best to avoid conversation.

My grandfather died when I was 13. A year later, my family went to Israel for the unveiling. After that, I didn’t go back to Israel for another 7 years. I think I saw my grandmother twice during that time—for my brother’s bar mitzvah and around my confirmation. Those visits were so awkward for me that, when I started college, I took Hebrew so I could finally have a real conversation with her.

I was 21 the first time I willingly talked with my grandmother. That is a painful reality, one that fills me with guilt. I tried to make up for it, visiting regularly during my first year of rabbinical school in Israel and again a few years later. And, despite my aunt’s

insistence that my grandmother would die before the trip that I knew would be my last time seeing her, I got a full week to be with her before she died. I was 27. And although she lived a full life, it was too soon for me. I was just getting to know her. I needed more time. I wish I'd had more time. And I wish I hadn't wasted the time that I'd had.

I've been feeling similarly since May, when my teacher and the president of Hebrew Union College, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Panken died just two days after handing me my diploma for a Master's in Jewish Education.

I wish I had hugged him a little tighter at the reception that afternoon.
I wish I had insisted on staying a few minutes longer.
I wish I had asked my dad to take a picture of us.

And I wish I'd had more opportunities to learn from him.
I wish I'd taken the opportunities I had.

I wish.

You see, I didn't know Rabbi Panken all that well. I studied to be a rabbi on the LA campus while he was based in New York. I had heard stories about him from my friends, and enjoyed his study session when he was in Pittsburgh a couple of years ago, but we didn't really interact until this past May. During the three days that my classmates and I were in New York for our capstone presentations and graduation, we saw Rabbi Panken every day.

On our second afternoon, after we had all finished our presentations, we had an hour to learn from Rabbi Panken and receive a pre-graduation blessing. I wish I remembered his words of blessing. But his teaching, without question, sticks in my mind.

Do you know those people who light up when they teach? The ones who get excited about sharing a favorite idea or piece of literature or period in history? Whose whole demeanor changes when an insight or bit of wisdom comes from a student? That was Rabbi Panken that afternoon. My guess is that that was Rabbi Panken in general.

When he pulled out a piece of Talmud and realized that none of us had ever studied it before, he got a look of glee about him. In this short passage, Rabbi Preida has a student who can only memorize a text if it's repeated 400 times. That day, the lesson is interrupted by someone who needs Rabbi Preida to help with the fulfillment of another mitzvah. Rabbi Preida says that he'll come in a little while. They continue to study and, after the 400th repetition, the student still hasn't memorized the text.

"What's wrong?" Rabbi Preida asks. The student responds, "Ever since you were called to help fulfill that other mitzvah, I've been unable to concentrate, wondering when

you're going to leave." "Then focus," says Rabbi Preida. "I won't leave until you've learned it." So they practice another 400 times and the student manages to memorize the text.

As Rabbi Preida leaves the Beit Midrash, a Heavenly Voice offers him a choice of reward: "Would you prefer an additional 400 years of life or a guaranteed place in the World to Come for you and your whole generation?" Without hesitation, Rabbi Preida chooses a place in the World to Come.

For Rabbi Aaron Panken, choosing a place in the World to Come for the entire generation was as much a given as it was for Rabbi Preida. Isn't that the essence of teaching? Rabbi Panken asked us. Teaching, he believed, was the ultimate way to bring reward and benefit to an entire generation. No wonder his face lit up every time he taught.

That was the last text I learned from him. Yes, he spoke at graduation, and I'm sure he taught something. But I was too antsy and excited to focus. And I had plenty of time to learn from him...or so I thought. Now? Now I wish I had been wise enough to pay attention, to learn directly from my teacher one more time, to be part of those who merit a place in the World to Come because I was one of his students.

And to have been at his funeral with Rabbi Gibson, it was clear that Rabbi Panken brought reward and benefit to all of his students and colleagues across generations. Thousands of people came to New York from around the world to honor his memory and his legacy. Thousands more, who couldn't be there in person, streamed the service or watched it later.

Together we laughed and cried and wondered how this brilliant, vibrant, and kind person could be dead. Together we reminisced and told stories. But most of all? Most of all we wished with all our hearts that it wasn't true. That somehow it was a terrible mistake and really he was alive. We wished to see him again and hear him again and learn from him again. We wished for more...

While I imagine that there might have been some people at Rabbi Panken's funeral who wished for more without questioning what they could have or should have done before he died, I know that my friends and I were struck with guilt along with our grief. The "if only"s filled our minds as we reflected on the hopes that could never be.

So often, when someone we love dies, we are left with wishes and guilt—and even anger. We wish that we could have more of their blessings in the future. We feel guilty for what we should have said or done that we didn't and for the things we shouldn't have said or done but did. And we might be angry that they died before fulfilling some of our expectations of them. And we're left hanging because there's nothing to be done about any of our wishes or guilt or anger. We are the ones left on Yom Kippur, on yahrzeits, and at other times filled with regret, while the person we loved is gone.

And it hurts! The pain of regret, of longing, is real. And it lingers long after death has taken our loved one from us. In some ways, that pain is one of the few things we have left of the person who died. It keeps them present and alive in our minds; otherwise we risk

forgetting them. Even our sweet memories of love and joy, of celebrations and quiet moments, are tinged by the bitterness, the pain, of loss. It's the fact that our loved one isn't physically present that reminds of our loss. We imagine that they're present in spirit. And we wish that they were there with us.

We wish. Our hearts could burst with the longing of our wishes. And while I wish that we didn't have to suffer that pain, and while I would not want that pain to be overwhelming, I would also never wish it away entirely. That pain, that longing, is their presence. That longing is our connection. That longing is our love.

So yes, wish and regret. Feel the bitterness along with the sweet memories. But most of all, love. Love so much that you take the opportunities you have. Love so much that you don't take the people you love and the time you have with them for granted. Love so much that when all you have are memories and wishes and regret, you still feel the comfort of love.

May this be God's will.