

Many of you have heard the poem written by Linda Ellis titled "The Dash", that reminds us of what may be the most important mark on any gravestone:

I read of a man who stood to speak  
at the funeral of a friend.  
He referred to the dates on the tombstone  
from the beginning...to the end.  
He noted that first came the date of birth  
and spoke the following date with tears,  
but he said what mattered most of all  
was the dash between those years.  
For that dash represents all the time  
that they spent alive on earth.  
And now only those who loved them  
know what that little line is worth.

There is, however, a different kind of dash that I see more and more as I deal with people when a loved one dies – a "mad dash." When I first started in the rabbinate, when people called to tell me about a death, they generally knew where their loved one was to be buried, which funeral home to use and so on. Recently, however, I find that relatives increasingly don't have a conversation with one another about what they want to happen should they die, and their survivors are left in the lurch trying to figure out what do. And so they make a mad dash after the death of a loved because no arrangements have been made. Beset by grief, they have to decide – in less than a day, if not just a few hours – what funeral home to use, what their loved one wanted for his or her funeral, who to call and where they intend on their relative being buried.

Why this mad dash? I wonder if it isn't because we are increasingly uncomfortable talking about death. It is hard to think about our end. Indeed, we take any opportunity to deny that death is something that is ultimately going to happen to us.

It's like the story about the rabbi who in the middle of his *Yizkor* sermon on Yom Kippur pounded on the lectern and said, "Wake up to the fact that every single person in this congregation, myself included, is going to die!" As he expected, everyone suddenly was very alarmed and became attentive

to everything he was saying, except for one man in the third row whose face broke out into a broad smile. The rabbi was so shocked, he pointed to the man. "So why are you so amused?" The man shrugged his shoulders and answered, "Well I'm not *from* this congregation. I'm just visiting my sister."<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, no escape. Whatever we do, there will come a time when we go where all those before us have gone – and if we don't think about it or discuss it with those we care about the most, we will leave them with the inevitable "mad dash."

How different is the following true encounter.

The old man asked me, "Will you do my eulogy?"

I don't understand, I said.

"My eulogy?" The old man asked again. "When I'm gone."

His eyes blinked from behind his glasses.

His neatly trimmed beard was gray, and he stood slightly stooped.

"Are you dying?" I asked.

"Not yet," he said, grinning.

"Then why ..."

"Because I think you will be a good choice. And I think, when the time comes, you will know what to say."

This was a dialogue that took place between two men, one of whom was a rabbi. But probably not the one you would guess – and I was not the rabbi.

This is a narrative is from the beginning of a book called *Have a Little Faith* by Mitch Albom, and it is a record of a conversation he had with his childhood rabbi, Rabbi Albert Lewis. He tells this story to explain why he wrote the book because, he explains, too few people reflect deeply on their death and, as a result, don't have a clear sense of what it means to live. In contrast with those who avoid speaking about dying, Rabbi Lewis taught that it is important to avoid the "mad dash", and openly confront our death.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Have a Little Faith: A True Story*, Mitch Albom, p. 231, adapted

Indeed, there is no day in the Jewish calendar that asks us to consider our death more than Yom Kippur. In many ways, this day is a kind of dress rehearsal for our end.

- First, we abstain from worldly pleasures – bathing, eating and drinking. It is a reminder that eventually all the things we think will make us happy and content - money, fame, having a family, seeing lots of places and bodily pleasures - will be beyond our grasp.
- Second, on Yom Kippur we recite וידוי *vidui*, a public admission of wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness. It is an echo of the deathbed confessional traditionally said in Judaism. While a rabbi is not required to say a confession before death, our traditions suggest it is important for one who is gravely ill to seek forgiveness from God and loved ones in order that should they die, they do so in peace.
- Finally, even the clothing worn traditionally on Yom Kippur – a white linen shirt (almost like at night shirt), called a *kittel* – is the very same thing one is dressed in after death.

Yom Kippur urges us not to run from the truth, but to embrace it. We must fight death as long as we can, for we are commanded to “choose life.” But when the time comes, it is best to be honest about what it means to lose all we hold dear.

In my experience, there is no single right way to face death. Some accept it with quiet dignity. Others fight it. Some are resigned. Some need to have all they love close by. Others want to be remembered as they were at their most vital – and want no one to see them “like this.”

But however we respond, let us take from the wisdom of facing death as we do each year on Yom Kippur and speak of death openly, forthrightly, with whatever our fears and expressive of our hopes for what will happen after we are gone.

When Mitch Albom's rabbi died he did give Rabbi Lewis's eulogy. After he did, however, he was surprised when one of the rabbi's grandsons came on

the *bimah* with a cassette tape (this was 10 years ago!), put it in a player and pushed play.

“Hello my friends, this is the voice of your past rabbi speaking!”

Rabbi Lewis had recorded a brief message, as if a voice from the grave. Rabbi Lewis only spoke about a minute or so, and shared the joys of his life – as well the pain, including the death of his daughter at a young age.

At the end he answered the two questions he said he had been asked the most throughout his life. One was, “Do you believe in God?” “Yes,” he said, “I do.” The other question was, “What happens when we die?” Does the soul have an existence that is separate from the body? To which he answered, “My answer ... is yes. But friends, I'm sorry, now that I know, I can't even tell you. You'll have to find it out for yourselves.”

We will all find out what lies beyond the veil. Before that time, however, don't wait to consider what matters. Focus on what needs repair within you. Consider the brokenness of the People of Israel. Help extinguish the flames of evil that seek to engulf our world. If you do all that, you won't be so afraid to face the reality of your death that will come, as it must to us all.

Then the “dash” of your life will be what really will be the most important of your legacy – and you will keep those you love from the “mad dash” because you left them as at peace as you left this world.

May the memory of our loved ones who have died be a blessing as, I pray, will our memory be in whatever time to come.