

Ending the Opera – Yom Kippur Yizkor 5780
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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The great composer, Giacomo Puccini, never finished his opera Turandot. The story, based on a work by the 12th century Persian poet Nizami, is well suited to opera: unrequited love, distant exotic lands, riddles and trials, the threat of death. As the first opera that I ever heard live, Turandot, and the Met's extravagant production of it, will always hold a warm place in my heart. But, the fact that Puccini did not finish it, brings new depth of meaning to the work.

Before dying in 1924, Puccini left instructions for Riccardo Zandonai to finish the opera. Puccini's son objected and eventually Franco Alfano was chosen to flesh out the sketches and notes that Puccini had left behind. Upon submitting the completed opera, Alfano received harsh feedback from Puccini's publisher and the great Arturo Toscanini who forced him to write another, shorter version that hewed more closely to Puccini's notes and sketches for the conclusion. Toscanini conducted this edited, short version for the premiere on April 25, 1926. Famously, "in the middle of act three, two measures after the words "*liu poesia*", Toscanini stopped, laid down his baton and declared "Here the Maestro laid down his pen."¹ The curtain fell, the opera unfinished.

And that is the way of the world. Everyone dies with an unfinished Turandot tucked in a drawer. Professionally or personally, with family or with friends, our work in the community or our hopes for our nation, no one leaves with the final ending in place. It is one of the most inconceivable things that people wrestle with at the end of their lives. I've sat with people in hospitals, at hospice, or at home, and they marvel that the world will go on turning after they die. They wonder how the next news cycle will end, if their friend will ever be able to complete the Sunday crosswords, how the company they founded will evolve, how their loved ones will fare without them, when their grandchild will take their first steps. Both mundane and monumental, our loved ones die with unfinished pieces.

Sometimes, our loved ones die like Puccini with plans sketched for where their opera should go, with instructions left for us to carry on. In our community, most of the time, estates are well documented and planned. Long wills, good lawyers, effective executors and the like divvy up the money and property. But we are usually left wondering what to do with the rest of our loved ones' legacies. They usually do not leave sketches and notes like Puccini for how we ought to continue their volunteer passions, cook the brisket, host Passover, tell the inappropriate jokes, mix the best martinis, knit the sweater for the great grandchild, or tell the stories of family members long gone so they are not forgotten.

As the heirs to their legacies, we can make the decision that Toscanini made, we can look back at what they've done, set down the baton, and declare the work unfinished and over. But that is not our way. We are more like Franco Alfano, we try to take what we've learned and what scant notes we have and try to continue the work and legacy of our loved ones. We do it when we spend time with family, when we give to charity, when we play their favorite games, eat their

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turandot>

recipes, wear their ring or use their favorite expressions. We carry on their work when we honor the traditions they cared about: coming to temple, getting married under a chuppah, buying grandchildren new clothing for Passover, hosting dinner on Erev Rosh Hashana, using funny nicknames for children, and spoiling everyone with too many Chanukah presents. We honor our loved ones who have died by trying to live out their values through the prisms of our own hearts, our own souls.

Turandot ends with the threat of death. It is not only the physical death, but the threat of oblivion, the threat that no one will remember, the threat that life didn't matter. In the opera, that threat is vanquished by love, a love that physically saves the protagonist and spiritually saves the opera's namesake. While we cannot stop the physical death of our loved ones, we can ultimately vanquish the spiritual pain as we continue to work on the music they brought into the world and into our lives, as we carry on their blessed legacies with integrity, with compassion, and with love.

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